

**IS PLAY-BASED ASSESSMENT A USEFUL TECHNIQUE FOR
EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS? AN INITIAL
EVALUATION OF THE VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF A
PLAY-BASED TOOL.**

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ABSTRACT

Play-based assessment is an increasingly popular technique for Educational Psychologists (EPs) in their assessments of young children. Play is seen as a medium through which progress across many developmental domains can be assessed, and a range of play-based assessment tools has been developed. Many claims are made about the value of play-based assessment but there have been few evaluations of its effectiveness, particularly for the approaches used by EPs in the UK.

This study investigated whether a particular play-based assessment model represents a valid and reliable assessment tool. A popular UK play-based assessment model (Let's Play) was selected as the focus of the study and was evaluated according to an established framework for the evaluation of psychological 'tests'. The framework included the key criteria of test-retest reliability, inter-rater reliability, concurrent validity, construct validity and face validity/taker rapport. Twelve pre-school children for whom EP involvement had been requested underwent a range of play-based assessments and the perceptions of pre-school staff and parents were collected.

The findings indicate that, overall, Let's Play provides reliable and valid assessment information but that it has shortcomings with respect to aspects of concurrent validity and the limited repertoire of play assessed. It performed particularly well in relation to accessibility, test-taker rapport and face validity. A simple answer to the question of usefulness is avoided, given the complexity of test evaluation and the uneven

performance of Let's Play across the criteria. However, practical considerations for EPs in the use of the tool are discussed, and the importance of the wider assessment process within which Let's Play is used is stressed. Further research is identified to overcome the limitations of the study, including the need to assess all the elements of Let's Play and to consider a broader, more qualitative range of evaluation criteria.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH REVIEW

1.1. Introduction

Play has always been considered an important part of early childhood and has a long history of research and theory within developmental psychology. Its current status is reflected by inclusion in a range of guidance to pre-schools (e.g. DfES, 1990 & 2000; Early Childhood Education Forum, 1998), although there has been much debate about the place of play and more formalised learning in pre-school settings. It also has prominence more generally, in terms of calls for action from pressure groups (e.g. The National Council for Children's Play, 1992) and its prominence in the media (e.g. The importance of time for play, *Independent on Sunday*, 18th July 1999; The effect of too many toys on play, *Sunday Times*, 25th February 2001).

Early Years work is an important and growing area for Educational Psychologists (EPs). The drive towards providing quality preschool provision and implementing the Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) for preschool children has resulted in an increased focus on the identification and assessment of a wide range of Special Educational Needs (SEN) amongst young children. EPs have always had some involvement in the assessment of young children, but the changes outlined above have given this work a higher profile. Such changes have also moved the focus towards assessments that incorporate more educational perspectives and inform strategies for support in the Foundation Stage. In addition, there have been calls for EPs to move away from models of individual casework towards developing more strategic and setting-level

work within the range of opportunities offered by recent developments in the field of Early Years (Dennis, 2003; Wolfendale & Robinson, 2004).

Nevertheless, assessment remains an important part of the work of EPs (Freeman & Miller, 2001) and much has been written about the principles and practice of quality assessment. Recently there has been a move away from formal, standardised assessment tools to more naturalistic, integrated and consultative approaches that aim to bring about real changes for children, staff and parents. Within the context of Early Years work, this has meant that psychologists have embraced new forms of assessment, including assessment through play. Play-based assessment aims to bring together the fields of play theory and assessment theory to provide an accessible and meaningful assessment context for young children, and many claims have been made about its advantages as an assessment tool. Various play-based assessment tools have been developed and it has now become part of the standard repertoire of assessment techniques for pre-school children:

Assessment of play is an especially important diagnostic tool for early childhood, and it is difficult to envision a comprehensive assessment of a young child without it. (Lidz, 2003, p.80)

It is also becoming an increasingly popular assessment tool amongst EPs in the UK, as evidenced by the publication of several play-based assessment models in recent times (e.g. Sayeed & Guerin, 2000; Waters, 1999).

The current study was prompted by the researcher's use of play-based assessment in everyday EP work. The approach seemed to offer an enjoyable assessment situation

with an apparently well-founded and clear framework that gave it the feel of a rigorous, professionally appropriate assessment tool. However, closer inspection of the assessment guidelines and wider research literature indicated that little or no evaluation had been carried out into this form of assessment, particularly in the UK. This was of concern, given that the approach was being used within a professional context and that considerable weight was likely to be given to the assessment findings, possibly in terms of decisions about support and provision for individual children.

The nature of play-based assessment can make it an attractive option for EPs, in that it has a certain ‘feel-good factor’. However, assessment of young children is a very complex and challenging task with potentially important outcomes for the child and family. Therefore, it can be argued that pre-school assessment tools should not only provide enjoyable and accessible assessment contexts – but that they should also crucially provide valid, reliable and useful information. This does not appear to have been proved for play-based assessment, despite its popularity in EP practice. This study therefore sets out to investigate whether play-based assessment is a valid and reliable assessment tool and to draw together the implications for practice.

1.2. Play and early development

This section will provide a brief overview of play and its perceived links to development in young children. These concepts are central to using play as an assessment tool.

1.2.1. *Definitions of play*

Play has been the subject of theory and speculation for a considerable time.

Pellegrini and Smith (1998) note the allure that play has held for developmental psychologists and the importance it has been given in childhood studies. However, despite this interest there is still very little consensus within the field, and the result is a complex pattern of theories and approaches. Despite the fact that the concept of play seems clear in everyday use, it remains a rather ‘fuzzy’ concept in terms of precise definitions and theories (Garvey, 1991) and several authors note the difficulty of generating a concise, unifying definition of play (e.g. Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Smith, Cowie & Blades, 1998). However, despite this lack of clarity, there are many theories about the origin, nature and functions of play. Sheridan (1999) provides a useful overview of these key play theories and theorists, although she acknowledges that this is not a complete list. Smith *et al.* (1998) add several theorists to those cited by Sheridan and, taken together, these two lists give a good overview of the diverse theoretical approaches to understanding play (see Table 1.1.).

Garvey (1991) notes that many of the early explanations of play have since been discarded or revised. One of the key criticisms of these early theories must be that many were not based on research evidence, although this criticism could also be levelled at much of the current literature on play. The picture is further complicated by the fact that the current literature looks at play from several perspectives. These different viewpoints are outlined by Pellegrini (2001), who identified structural perspectives (focusing on overt behaviours), functional perspectives (focusing on outcomes) and dispositional perspectives (focusing on emotions and motivation).

Table 1.1. Key play theorists

Theorist	Dates	Key ideas
Athey	20 th century	Concept of schemas in play.
Bruner	1915-	Role of play in providing the firsthand experiences and physical activity needed for development.
Erikson	1902-1979	Links between imaginative play and emotions.
Froebel	1782 - 1852	Kindergarten movement. Learning through active, imaginative and pretend play. Importance of outdoor and creative activities.
Issacs	1885-1948	Play as a means to express feelings. The importance of not starting formal learning too early.
Montessori	1870-1952	Learning through structured rather than spontaneous play.
Piaget	1896-1980	Sequential model of the development of thinking.
Vygotsky	1896-1934	Play allows children to participate in activities that they cannot in reality do. Importance of the adult's role in learning.
Winnicott	1896-1974	Play is essential to social and emotional development. Play and learning are closely related. Importance of transitional objects.
Spencer	19 th century	Play for immediate purpose, stimulation of nervous system.
Groos	19 th /20 th century	Play provides exercise and practise of skills.
Hall	early 20 th century	Play allows children to 'work through' earlier stages in human evolution.
Freud	20 th century	Play as a route for wish fulfilment and mastery of traumatic events.

Adapted from Sheridan (1999, p.11-12) & Smith *et al.* (1998, p.192-195).

Structural approaches (e.g. Bruce, 1996; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998) outline play according to areas such as *exploratory, locomotor, imaginative, symbolic* and *pretend* and these categories are widely used in the literature on play- based assessment.

Several authors have attempted to provide overviews of play that incorporate structural, functional and dispositional perspectives. For example, Richman and Dawe (1988) outline that it is voluntary, pleasurable, has no ultimate goal and has structures and rules. Garvey extends this list a little in her characteristics of play, and these have be quoted by several developers of play-based assessment tools (e.g. Sayeed & Guerin, 2000):

- pleasurable and enjoyable;
- no extrinsic goal;
- spontaneous and voluntary;
- involves active engagement; and
- has a systemic relation to what is not play.

Smith *et al.* (1998) take a slightly different perspective, suggesting a ‘criterion approach’ to defining play. In this approach, play characteristics such as those outlined by Garvey are seen as overlapping concepts and their degree of co-occurrence in play is used to determine how play-like a particular set of behaviours is likely to be. This is a more flexible approach that may better reflect the complexity of play, as it allows play behaviour to be seen as a continuum from non-play to very playful.

1.2.2. *The development of play in young children*

Many writers describe developmental sequences of play in a way that suggests there is a clear understanding of how play develops in childhood (e.g. Richman & Dawe, 1988; Sheridan, 1999). Unlike many others, Smith *et al.* (1998) look at the development of play from the point of view of the research evidence and note that there are many shortcomings in this evidence base, such as the fact that much of the evidence has come from laboratory studies where children have been provided with particular toys. There are certainly some studies that derive developmental sequences from direct study of children's play, for example the investigation by Belsky and Most (1980) into the development of infant play with objects. However, even these have come under criticism for their lack of rigour (Cohen, 1993). In summary, there is a common understanding of a progression of play skills as children mature but there is also debate and a lack of evidence as to the actual pattern of that development.

There is a considerable body of work that claims that play has benefits to children and that it can give an indication of other developmental abilities (Linder, 1990; Richman & Dawe, 1998; Sheridan, 1999). Many play theorists claim that play is an activity that helps children to learn (Pellegrini, 1987; Rogers, 1982; Vedeler, 1997) and that it has benefits in adult life (Bruce, 1996) and for the child's current functioning (Pellegrini & Smith, 1988). However, once again, the research basis for such claims is far from clear. Pellegrini and Smith (1998) provide a helpful review of the research evidence for the functions of play and consider various types of studies (e.g. cost-benefit analysis, experimental deprivation studies). They conclude that much more research is needed before sound conclusions can be made about the

role of play in development. Smith *et al.* (1998) also review the research and conclude that although there is some evidence of cognitive benefits and stronger evidence for social benefits, no clear picture has emerged from the research.

1.2.3. *Play with objects*

Many play-based assessment tools focus on play with objects, and one way of understanding play is according to the material or resource with which the child is engaged (Garvey, 1991). In this section, some of the issues in relation to children's play with objects will be briefly reviewed.

Cohen (1993) provides a useful overview of play with objects and takes a very ecological and naturalistic approach. He stresses the paradox between children's spontaneous, creative play with objects and the way that adults have constrained this, both in practice and research. He is critical of the research for focusing on play with objects in isolation from the social context and for focusing on only certain play objects (for example, it does not look at how children turn everyday objects into playthings). He concludes that much of the research on play with objects views play as a 'desiccated skill', divorced from real, fun play situations. Bruce (1996) stresses that toys are cultural artefacts that teach children about the culture in which they are brought up. Similarly, Dixon (1990) reviews many of the toys currently for sale in terms of the messages they transmit to children – particularly in relation to race, gender and class. Both authors stress the role of commercial concerns in promoting the particular toys available to children.

1.2.4. Contextual influences on play

Much of the research described so far has focused on within-child explanations of play behaviour. However, there is also a body of research that looks at the influence of context and, given that play-based assessment situations represent a range of specific play contexts, some of these factors will now be reviewed. It should be noted, however, that the literature in relation to the various individual factors appears to be small and sometimes rather sketchy, and it is therefore difficult to gain a full picture of the part that individual factors may play.

Sayeed and Guerin (2000) explore the complex relationship between culture and play. They comment on the lack of research but note that some differences have been observed between traditional and non-traditional societies (e.g. the amount of one-to-one play and the transmission of values such as interdependence or independence). Several other researchers have contrasted play within different societies and found differences in areas such as fantasy play (Richman & Dawe, 1998) and symbolic play (Rogers, 1982). Curtis (1994) describes how our perceptions of play are closely associated with our own societal beliefs and will reflect the way a society construes work and play activities.

Sayeed and Guerin also note that there are many commonly held beliefs about the effect of gender and sex-specific toys on play. Rogers (1982) reviews the literature in this area and concludes that the main differences between boys and girls are in fine motor and dramatic play. Rubin and Howe (1985) found that pre-school children conform more to sex-type norms when playing with a partner of the opposite sex. The effects of gender on play with toys have also been investigated, although, as

Cohen (1993) notes, the literature in this area is small. In particular, Cohen describes differences in the way boys may approach play with dolls in terms of more exploratory play and less parenting games. Pellegrini (2001) found that children show the highest degree of competency with sex-role consistent toys and Mogford-Bevan (2002) observed different play preferences between boys and girls for a small set of toys.

Rubin and Howe (1985) and Rogers (1982) review the literature on the effect of setting on play. Both reviews conclude that the physical setting has an impact on play in terms of aspects such as space and familiarity, although Rubin and Howe also note the need for much more research to investigate the effect of these variables. Many authors also stress the central role of adults in facilitating and extending children's play (e.g. Sheridan, 1999). Smith *et al.* (1998) review the literature in this area and conclude that there is reasonably strong evidence for the role that pre-school staff can play in encouraging children's play. There is also evidence that children respond differentially to various peers in terms of the 'maturity' of their social play (Rogers, 1982). Pellegrini (2001) summarises various studies by himself and colleagues which found that fantasy play in pre-school children was inhibited by adult play partners and enhanced by peer partners, and Mogford-Bevan (2002) suggests that imaginative play can be inhibited by unfamiliar adults.

Rubin and Howe (1985) carried out a careful and critical review of the research on the influence of types of toys on play behaviours, much of which has been carried out by Rubin and colleagues. They describe how there is now evidence that certain types of toys elicit certain types of behaviour. For example, paints crayons and

scissors are most commonly accompanied by non-social but constructive play, and more realistic toys usually elicit more pretend play. Rubin and Howe conclude their review by saying that there are far more unanswered than answered questions in relation to the impact of toys on children's play – and comment that the lack of research in this area is remarkable, given that it is still not clear whether the child or the toy has the greatest impact on the play behaviour elicited. Garvey (1991) focuses on the influence of one particular feature of toys – their familiarity. She describes how children react to objects that are not familiar to them by tending to explore them before playing. She also suggests that exploratory play may be necessary if a child is in an unfamiliar setting or with unknown people. Lidz (2003) reviews the literature in this area and also concludes that interaction with unfamiliar toys tends to be exploratory.

1.2.5. Play and children with Special Educational Needs

This section will focus on play and children with SEN, as this is the group of children with whom EPs will carry out play-based assessments. Rogers (1982) reviews the literature on the play of children with 'handicaps' and concludes that they may or may not show differences in their play. Although this review is rather dated, she does highlight the major problem that much of the research was carried out before the 1970s and is therefore confounded by the fact that many of the children were living in institutions. Given the importance of the contextual variables outlined in the previous section, it may not be surprising that these children played differently. Lidz (2003), however, gives a more updated review of the literature and comes to similar conclusions to Rogers.

One of problems with many of the studies in this area is that they tend to consider children with disabilities as a homogenous group and to draw conclusions about play on the basis of crude comparisons of 'disabled' verses 'not disabled' (e.g. Johnson & Ershler, 1985; Sigafos, Roberts-Pennell & Graves, 1999). Studies that differentiate play in relation to different types of SEN are likely to be more informative, although they also need to be treated with caution because of the dangers of categorising children with a particular area of difficulty as a homogenous and discrete group. It should also be remembered that although the play of children with and without various types of SEN may differ, it may still be more similar than dissimilar to that of other children. There are, however, some useful reviews of the literature in this area which, despite the limitations outlined above, can give useful insights into possible differences in play. The reviews by Linder (1990) and Sayeed and Guerin (2000) are particularly useful and, in the case of Sayeed and Guerin, also contain direct evidence drawn from single case studies of children they have observed in their work as EPs. These reviews are summarised in Table 1.2.

More recently, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of social and environmental factors in the differences in play observed in children with SEN. This emphasis links closely with the earlier discussion about views of play and toys as socially, contextually and culturally defined phenomena. For example, Dickens and Denziloe (1999) discuss the play of children with SEN from the perspective of inclusion and barriers to play and note a number of social differences that may impact on the play observed:

Table 1.2. Play and children with Special Educational Needs

Type of SEN	Review of literature (Linder, 1990)	Findings from case studies (Sayed & Guerin, 2000)	Wider findings quoted (Sayed & Guerin, 2000)
General Learning difficulties	Same sequences of play development as other children; restricted repertoire of play skills; stereotyped behaviour in children with severe difficulties.	Gross motor skills hinder participation; cognitive skills prevent imitating/ sequencing play; lack of experience/skills may affect confidence; sociability + enthusiasm enable participation; more comfortable as observer.	It is no longer assumed that children with learning difficulties do not want to/need to play; play can act as a positive learning experience; tend to develop play along a normal continuum but at a slower rate.
Emotional and behavioural difficulties	Not mentioned.	Able to play independently and communicate intentions; difficulties sharing space and equipment with other children.	Context for play must support behavioural and emotional needs; ADHD – less complex peer play, less attentive, less cooperative, lack of social play skills. Abused children – less mature imaginative, social and fantasy play.
Physical disability	Possible difficulties tracking and manipulating play objects; may be passive and dependent on others in play; may have difficulty seeking social interaction.	Motivated to play by equipment suited to needs; reliant on adult support; physical restrictions impede exploration and may affect play.	Access to environment is main hindrance to play; difficulties communicating may have implications for play.
Sensory impairments (hearing)	Less symbolic play; more solitary and parallel play; fewer social contacts; less organised play; delays in representational play.	Curious + observant; difficulties understanding play context/responding to suggestions; confidence and communication affect self-assertion.	Less symbolic and socio-dramatic play.
Sensory impairments (visual)	Explore by feel and keep objects close to body; delayed exploration of toys + environment; do not show complex social play; imitation is delayed or absent; more solitary play, fewer social interactions.	Explores space through problem solving and physical skills; peer involvement is lacking.	Many misconceptions – stereotype that children don't play; predominantly exploratory and sensori-motor; very small amount of symbolic play; play can be highly imaginative but is engaged in less often.
Speech and language difficulties	Not mentioned.	Willing and engaging player; difficulties less apparent until needed to make a verbal contribution to a game; support from peers was variable.	Environmental factors e.g. peer pressure can affect participation especially symbolic + socio-dramatic play; lack of language can inhibit the participation in make-believe play.
Medical condition	Not mentioned.	Health inhibited participation; peers created a role for him so he could continue to play.	May elicit more peer empathy than other forms of SEN; safety aspects are important.
Autism	Literature is confounded by varied labels and compound diagnoses; repetitive, stereotypical movements may preclude play and social interaction in play.	Concentrates well on their own play; does not respond to brother; engrosses self in repetitive activity; communicative intent of sounds is unclear.	Several misconceptions - do not always show repetitive play; less frequent symbolic play – but may be due to motivation; language difficulties may also impact on symbolic play.

- children with disabilities are often more protected from physical risk, failure and unkindness (and play should involve excitement, challenge and risk);
- they often play in organised/ segregated group situations where opportunities for wider play partners can be lost;
- they may have a high level of adult intervention and this can impact on play; and
- they may access a different range of toys due to the notion that special toys are needed for children with SEN.

Like other authors, Dickens and Denziloe note that differences have been identified in the play of children with SEN. However, their focus is less on within-child factors and more on the impact of social factors and broader psychological factors such as lack of experience, history of failure, and the fact that play may be painful or tiring. Such perspectives on the play of children with SEN need to be considered alongside the more within-child, deterministic views of the nature of play.

1.2.6. Summary

Play theory has a long and diverse history within psychology and, although much has been written about the nature and function of play, the empirical evidence to support these assertions is inconclusive. Play is often considered to be a result of within-child processes but research indicates that a range of cultural, social and environmental factors may influence children's play. There has been relatively little research on the play of children with SEN, although some general comments can be

tentatively made about the play of children with various types of difficulties.

However, their play should also be considered in terms of the contextual and social barriers that may be operating.

1.3. Pre-school assessment

1.3.1. *An overview of assessment in Educational Psychology*

This section will give a brief overview of the importance of assessment in relation to educational psychology.

Assessment in the widest sense is the bread and butter of an educational psychologist's work. (Shah *et al.*, 1997, p.28)

Frederickson and Cline (2002) provide a useful overview of assessment in this 'widest sense', covering assessments that focus on the learner, the teaching programme, the child's response to support, and the learning environment itself. They comment that assessments of the learner have typically involved 'a detailed examination of the child with difficulties' and an assumption that any difficulties must lie within the children. Traditionally, this type of assessment has been central to the work of EPs (Freeman & Miller, 2001) and its value has been stressed by EPs concerned that it could be under threat from more systemic ways of working (e.g. Campion, 1987). Buck (1998) provides a useful overview of the history and changing nature of individual assessments in educational psychology and, in particular, the emergence in 1980s of concepts such as 'assessment over time',

curriculum-based assessment and criterion-based assessment. Other changes not mentioned by Buck are the development of 'ecological' approaches to individual assessment (e.g. Boxer, Challen & McCarthy, 1991) and the increasing emphasis on dynamic assessment in EP work (Deutsch & Reynolds, 2000; Freeman & Miller, 2001; Guthke, Beckmann & Dobat, 1997). Other key developments in individual assessment have been the application of problem-solving models (e.g. Monsen, Graham, Frederickson & Cameron, 1998) and consultative approaches (e.g. Labram, 1992; Wagner, 1995), so that assessment is seen as part of a process of identifying concerns, forming hypotheses, testing hypotheses and formulating, implementing and evaluating action plans (Frederickson & Cameron, 1999). There have also been calls for a renewed focus on the psychological basis of assessment practice in the light of changes in the education system (Frederickson, Webster & Wright, 1991; Norwich, 1995). Such developments have particular relevance given the concerns of EPs about the growth in demand for standardised, statutory assessment work (Boxer *et al.*, 1991) and the resulting pressure towards the increased use of psychometric assessment tools (Buck, 1998; Lokke, Gersch, M'gadzah & Frederickson, 1997).

The British Psychological Society provides a guiding framework for good practice in psychological assessment (BPS, 1999). This framework reflects the move towards more dynamic and interactive models where assessment is seen as part of a problem-solving process leading to change. It also firmly embeds assessment within social, political and ethical contexts. The document lists the principles of psychological assessment, which are summarised in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3. Principles of psychological assessment

(as outlined by the British Psychological Society)

Principles of educational psychological assessment

- Underpinned by the principles of psychological theories and research.
- Assessment tools selected on the basis of: relevance to problem and purpose of assessment; sensitivity to child's needs and ethnic, cultural and social background; and reliability, validity and possible bias.
- Acknowledges that children develop as a result of interaction between themselves and their environment. Ideally, assessments take place over time and environments; inform interventions; involve parents/carers; are widely based; incorporate the child's view; and draw on the views of other professionals where appropriate.
- Psychologists should be aware of the impact of their own beliefs and attitudes on assessment practice.
- Psychologists should be aware of the impact of the assessment process on the child, family and school system.
- Reporting should be sensitive and related to the purpose of the assessment
- Assessment is informed by continuing professional development.
- Assessment should conform to BPS code of conduct and ethical guidelines.

(Summarised from guidelines issued by the BPS Division of Child and Educational Psychology, 1999)

This is very much a top-down view of quality assessment but it is supported by the principles of assessment developed by practising EPs (e.g. Shah *et al.*, 1997).

Encouragingly, there does seem to be some consensus about what constitutes good practice in EP assessments, even if there is some debate about actual assessment techniques.

1.3.2. *Assessment frameworks in pre-school practice*

Play-based assessment is an approach designed for use with pre-school children, and although assessment of children of this age has much in common with the general assessment practices outlined above, it also has unique features and presents particular challenges.

Assessment of young children is not an easy task – certainly not one for the weak of mind or heart. (Lidz, 2003, p.33)

Additionally, pre-school assessment is in a process of transition, with a move away from the use of standardised tests and approaches designed for use with older children towards a methodology of its own (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000). As long ago as the 1980s, EPs such as Gaussen (1984) were calling for a move away from standardised assessment tools and the development of new assessment tools in pre-school practice. Since that time, assessment methods have shifted away from highly specialised procedures administered in formal environments to approaches more embedded within everyday experiences.

In reviewing this area, a distinction will be made between practice in the US and the UK. Generally, authors in the US (e.g. Lidz, 2003; Ulrey & Schnell, 1982; Wilson, 1998) have a more medicalised, clinical view of assessment and a stronger focus on professional expertise and transdisciplinary assessment teams. Authors in the UK (e.g. Newton, 1988; Smith & Reynolds, 1998; Wolfendale & Robinson, 2001) often describe assessments that take place within broader contexts, the framework of the Code of Practice and a more collaborative and consultative style of working. It is also important to recognise that there is a relatively small literature on assessing young children's needs from a UK educational point of view. The literature from the US is helpful in supplementing this information, although sometimes it does not fit very comfortably within the UK context. The work of Wolfendale and her colleagues is particularly prominent within the UK literature and is perhaps more helpful in considering the work of EPs. Wolfendale (1997) outlines key aspects that make the assessment of young children specialised – including the focus on specific behaviours, their relation to functioning, interpreting and synthesising a range of assessment findings within an ecological or situation-specific framework, and taking single/collective action as the result of the assessment. Barnett, Hancock, Hardy and McCarthy (1997) and Wolfendale and Robinson (2001) describe frameworks for pre-school assessment that include many of the general principles of good assessment practice and which place assessment within the wider context of planning, hypothesis testing and intervention.

1.3.3. Specific considerations in pre-school assessment

This section will look at some of the particular issues in pre-school assessments.

Many of these also apply to the assessment of older children, but are included in this

review because of their relevance to play-based assessment. Most of these issues are not new. For example, the book by Cattell (1940) on assessing infants and young children covers many of the same areas and raises many issues that still challenge psychologists. It should also be noted that although many authors talk about good practice considerations, much of pre-school practice is still embedded in more traditional paradigms. For example, Lidz (2003) is a strong supporter of a context-based, ecological approach to the assessment of young children and describes assessment as a collaborative problem solving process where information is gathered from multiple views and contexts. However, she then goes on to describe an assessment practice that takes place in a special room, with a detailed structure, interviews of key adults, and direct assessment of the child.

Young children's approaches to assessment

Ulrey and Schnell (1982) discuss how differences in young children's language, motivation, thinking and experience make pre-school assessment particularly difficult. Children have not learnt the 'rules' of test behaviour and the assessor therefore needs to elicit behaviours from the child, rather than simply expecting them to 'perform'. They also caution that obtaining the cooperation of infants can be challenging and can lead to the conclusion that the child is 'untestable'. This problem is commonly reported (Cronbach, 1990; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000; Thurman & Widerstrom, 1990; Waters, 1999). Lidz (1983) concludes that children's responses in assessment are more a reflection of this 'response bias' than of a particular test item and Pellegrini (2001) claims that results relate more to a child's motivation than their skills. In order to overcome these difficulties, Lidz (2003) recommends that young children need to be assessed when they are alert and willing

to interact, in a comfortable environment, with age-appropriate materials and directions, and an assessor who is accessible, flexible and 'comfortable' with young children.

Assessment across contexts and time

The importance of conducting assessments in familiar, unthreatening and interesting environments has been stressed in early years practice (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000; Wilson, 1998) and there has been considerable importance placed on observing young children in a range of 'natural' environments (Pellegrini, 1987; Thurman & Widerstrom, 1990). The importance of assessments over time has also been stressed (Lidz, 2003).

Holistic/context embedded assessments

There is increasing acknowledgement that early years assessments should seek to gain a rich perspective of a child's development and take into account the child's cultural background and experiences (Barnett *et al.*, 1997; Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001; Wolfendale & Robinson, 2001). Meisels and Atkins-Burnett (2000) explore the way that assessment can overlook the way that children acquire skills in different cultures. For example, in many cultures a 2 year old is expected to perform some self care functions but this is not true in all cultures. Early years assessment has also gradually moved away from the view that early development is about growth in the unitary concept of 'mental ability' (Cronbach, 1990). More recent authors such as Meisels and Atkins-Burnett (2000) and Wilson (1998) stress that assessment should address broad areas and reflect the interdependence of skills. Wilson (1998) notes that normal early development tends to be non-linear and

intermittent – and this combined with the child’s approach can make predictions from assessments very problematic. She recommends that assessment data from young children should be used as a snapshot of the child’s performance and stresses that it should never be used as a total picture of the child or as a predictor of future performance.

Normalising

Meisels and Atkins-Burnett (2000) recommend that assessments of young children’s skills should place development within a ‘normal’ continuum made up of a series of steps, rather than providing details of milestones that have yet to be reached.

Turning to the normality of the assessment situation itself, Wilson (1998) looks at the issue of what she calls ‘intrusiveness’. She suggests that some assessment procedures are invasive of the child and family’s privacy, intrusive of their time, and threaten their confidence and trust. She recommends that care should be taken to minimise intrusiveness and over-assessment of young children.

Collaborative working

Interdisciplinary working and interdisciplinary teams are particularly well established in early years practice, especially in the US, and throughout the literature their importance for allowing multiple perspectives on a child’s development is stressed. Meisels and Atkins-Burnett (2000), Thurman and Widerstrom (1990) and Wilson (1998) all describe such teams from a US clinical perspective. They place an emphasis on the specialist roles of professionals, with the psychologists taking the lead in areas such as evaluating the child’s intelligence, adaptive behaviour, emotional behaviour, and personality. In contrast, the UK literature focuses more on

multidisciplinary working as a general framework for early years practice (e.g. Wolfendale, 2000; Wolfendale & Robinson, 2001). Newton (1988) describes the participatory assessment approach in early years work in the UK – whereby the multiple perspectives of key adults are used to gain a picture of the child. Of particular interest is the role of the EP, and Newton challenges the view of the EP as a separate, detached person who can make objective judgements from outside of the child's system; instead suggesting that they are direct participants in a child's world during the assessment process.

Building on such notions of collaborative assessment, parents can be viewed not only as key users of psychological pre-school services (Cross, Kirkaldy & Kennedy, 1991), but also as key partners in the assessment process (Lidz, 2003). Meisels and Atkins-Burnett (2000) look at the importance of the assessor forming a 'working alliance' with significant adults in the child's life and claim that such relationships are central to the process of assessment.

1.4. Assessment tools for use with pre-school children

1.4.1. *General considerations*

Given the issues outlined above, it is perhaps not surprising that considerable importance has been placed on selecting the most appropriate assessment tools for use with young children (Ulrey & Schnell, 1982; Wilson, 1998). Pellegrini (2001) describes the situation from the US perspective, with particular reference to standardised tests:

Assessment of young children in school and clinical settings has a very stormy history, a history that continues into the present with little likelihood of immediate abeyance. The tempestuousness derives primarily from the misuse of one specific form of assessment, tests, with very young children. (Pellegrini, 2001, p.862)

Ulrey and Schnell (1982), Thurman and Widerstrom (1990) and Wilson (1998) all look at the reliability and validity of standardised assessment tools designed for use with young children. It is noted that they are poor predictors of future performance, except when children have very significant needs. There are also concerns about standardisation, administration time, training needed by the assessor and lack of appeal to children.

Newton (1988) reflects on the shift away from use of IQ tests with young children in the UK because of concerns over their suitability. This shift is reflected in Wolfendale and Robinson's (2001) outline of pre-school assessment tools for EPs, which includes interviews, observations, checklists, play assessment, dynamic assessment and assessment through teaching/early learning goals. There have also been moves to include more qualitative aspects of children's approach in order to gain functional information about how children participate in their worlds (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000). In addition, there has been a move towards approaches based on dynamic assessment, in which the focus is not on static measures of the child's performance but on how they improve their performance through tasks carried out in interaction with the assessor (Deutsch & Reynolds, 2000). Dynamic assessment covers a wide range of approaches, some of which are highly structured and may have some of the shortcomings of traditional psychometric approaches in their aim to

‘measure’ a person’s ‘potential’ (Elliott & Lauchlan, 1997). Several authors comment on the popularity of dynamic assessment amongst EPs but note its lack of use in EP practice (Deutsch & Reynolds, 2000; Guthke *et al.*, 1997; Stringer *et al.*, 1997). Despite this lack of usage, it is felt by many (e.g. Elliott & Lauchlan, 1997; Freeman & Millar, 2001; Jensen, 2003) to have the potential to offer more useful assessment information in terms of links to classroom practice and informing intervention strategies. It is also increasingly being seen as an assessment approach for use with young children, although some of the approaches suggested are very structured and test-based (e.g. Tzuriel, 1997). In the UK, Waters and Stringer (1997) have linked the ideas of dynamic assessment with a more unstructured pre-school assessment model in order to provide a view of a child’s ‘emerging cognitive functions’ in their play. Most recently, Waters (1999) and Sayeed and Guerin (2000) have developed informal, qualitative dynamic assessment elements within pre-school play-based assessment tools.

1.4.2. *Criteria for effective pre-school assessment tools*

This section will look at some of the features of effective assessment tools identified in the literature. However, before looking at specific aspects of the tools themselves, it is important to remember that the usefulness of a test is critically affected by the rigour and biases operating throughout the assessment process. For example, in looking at effective assessment processes for EPs, Frederickson and Cameron (1999) outline various elements that incorporate both features of the tool and of the assessment process. They include the appropriateness of the tool for the assessment purpose, the reliability and validity of the tool, accessibility of the tool, and ethical

considerations (e.g. competence of assessor; confidentiality; consent). In relation to the assessment of young children, Pellegrini (2001) notes that a key difficulty relates to the fact that assessment findings are often used to make ‘high stakes’ decisions such as placement in special provision. Clearly, it is of little use to have an extremely good assessment tool if it is not used within a rigorous, equitable and ethical assessment process.

Having acknowledged the importance of the wider assessment process, this section will now focus on some of the criteria for effective assessment tools. Before looking at particular features of tools it is worth considering the complexity of such decisions. Cronbach (1990) provides an extremely useful overview of the evaluation of psychological tests and makes the following observations:

- there is no universal answer to the question, which is the best test for x;
- the test that best suits one type of worker is unlikely to be the best for another;
- no test maker can put all the desirable qualities into one test – if you improve the quality of a test in one area, you generally sacrifice some other quality;
- a test is selected for a particular situation and purpose; and
- the level of quality needed depends on the function the test is to perform.

Despite this complexity, various frameworks have been developed for the evaluation of psychological assessment tools. Anastasi (1990) provides a particularly useful framework that she claims contains the basic features applicable to most tests, including those that are less structured and formal. See Table 1.4.

Table 1.4. A suggested outline for test evaluation

A. General test information	Author, date, publisher, costs.
B. Purpose and nature of the test	Type of test, population for which designed, nature of content, item types.
C. ‘Practical evaluation’ criterion	Qualitative features of test materials. Ease of administration/scoring procedures. Examiner qualifications and training. Face validity/taker rapport.
D. ‘Technical evaluation’ criterion	<u>Norms</u> : types and standardisation sample. <u>Reliability</u> : types and procedures, including: test-retest, parallel form, split half, scorer reliability, equivalence of forms, long-term stability. <u>Validity</u> : content, criterion (concurrent or predicted), construct.
E. Reviewer comments	From a range of sources.
F. Summary evaluation	Major strengths and weaknesses of test, across all parts of the outline.

(from Anastasi,1990, p.676)

Cronbach (1990) covers many of the same areas, but also includes ‘comments regarding fairness’ and gives examples of considerations relating to ethnicity and gender. Such issues are important in the assessments carried out by EPs.

There are very few evaluation frameworks designed specifically for assessments of young children. However, Wilson (1998) does focus on young children in her framework, and covers many of the same areas as both Anastasi and Cronbach. See Table 1.5.

Table 1.5. An evaluation framework for early years assessment tools

- Are materials and procedures reliable and valid?
- Are materials and procedures child friendly?
- How much training is needed for the administrator?
- What adaptations, if any are required to meet the needs of children with various 'impairments'?
- What role do parents have in administering the assessment?
- What was the cultural orientation of the normative sample? Were efforts made to include minority ethnic groups?

Summarised from Wilson (1998)

However, in some ways this framework is less rigorous than both Anastasi's and Cronbach's and this may reflect Wilson's perspective as a practitioner, rather than an 'expert' on psychological testing.

1.4.3. *Reliability and validity*

Reliability and validity are the cornerstones of test evaluation, deriving from the assumptions associated with classical test theory (Barker, Pistrang & Elliot, 2002).

There are particular issues concerning the validity and reliability of assessment findings gained through observation (Foster, 1996; Pellegrini, 1996). For example, people may not behave as they usually do, especially in artificial situations (participant reactivity) and observer bias can greatly influence the data collected.

There are also particular issues related to the reliability and validity of tools based on

dynamic assessment approaches, in that some of the aspects of reliability may not apply in the same way (Jensen, 2003) but aspects of validity may be equally as important (Tzuriel, 1997).

Validity

Validity looks at whether the tool measures what it claims to and is arguably the most important feature of test evaluation:

The fundamental basis for choosing a test is validity...reliability is a supplementary consideration. Excellent reliability cannot compensate for unacceptable validity. (Cronbach, 1990, p.124)

However, it should be noted that many psychological tests have surprisingly low validity (Kline, 2000). Various forms of validity are included within Anastasi's framework:

- *concurrent validity* - how scores relate to performance on other relevant measures, either now or in the future;
- *content validity* - whether the test items are relevant and clear with suitable coverage of the field;
- *construct validity* – how assessment information is interpreted, organised and construed; and
- *face-validity* – whether the test appears appropriate.

Anastasi notes that there is particular confusion with regard to construct validity. The concept was first introduced by Cronbach and Meehl (1955) who used it to describe how well tests measured psychological constructs, but Anastasi notes that many subsequent evaluators have incorrectly assumed that it must be inferred through comparisons with scores on other tests. Similarly, Kline (2000) describes how construct validity is not a simple comparison measure, but instead encompasses all other measures of validity and a degree of inference and judgement. There is also considerable controversy around the role of face validity in psychological tests (Roberts, 2000). Cronbach (1990) is quite dismissive of this criterion, noting that a test's reputation and appearance are not necessarily a reflection of its merit, but may relate more to factors such as advertising and information in the manual. He does acknowledge that 'appeal to the lay person' is important and notes that tests should seem interesting and sensible to the taker and promote good relationships with the tester. Kline (2000) is also wary of face validity and notes that it is not strictly necessary for a test to be considered valid. However, there does seem to be an increased awareness of its importance in applied psychology, and of the low face validity of many well-used tests (Martin, 2002).

Reliability

Reliability reflects the accuracy of test measurements and the proportion of scores made up by errors in the variance of measures rather than 'true' differences in performance. Barker *et al.* (2002) outline 4 types of reliability, which are all also included in Anastasi's framework:

- *test-retest* – the consistency of measurement over time;
- *equivalent forms* – reliability across different versions of the test;
- *internal consistency* – consistency of items in measuring the same concept;
and
- *inter-rater* – used for observational measures, to test the reliability of
observers.

Reliability appears to be a less contentious area than validity, although Kline (2000) notes that there are debates within psychology about whether internal consistency is strictly necessary in the light of the fact that many psychological tests cover broad and internally inconsistent concepts.

1.4.4. Summary

This section has looked at the criteria for effective assessment tools for use with young children. Although there are very few frameworks specifically for pre-school work, there is a large literature on the evaluation of psychological tests in general. Issues of reliability and validity are key to establishing the effectiveness of assessment tools, although they need to be considered in the light of the wider assessment context within which the test is placed.

1.5. Play-based assessment

Play-based assessment brings together the domains of play and assessment previously discussed in this review. Pellegrini (2001) concludes that in many ways these two terms are incompatible and notes that, in contrast to play, assessment is defined by adults, is structured and is concerned with end products of activities. However, this apparent tension has not prevented play-based assessment becoming 'a cornerstone of early assessment and intervention practices' (Paget, 1998, p.485). The term covers a range of assessment tools with different degrees of structure and focus, but is characterised by the following features (Lidz, 2003):

- it tends to focus on play with objects;
- it tends to be developmentally rather than norm or curriculum referenced;
- it can vary in the degree of structure and standardisation;
- it relies heavily on approaches drawn from behavioural observation; and
- it usually represents a specific view about play.

As with pre-school assessment in general, the development of play-based assessment has followed different developmental paths in the UK and US. Lidz (2003) describes a 'surge' in development in the US during the 1970s and 80s that culminated in Linder's (1990) book outlining the model of 'transdisciplinary play-based assessment' (TPBA). Reviews of recent literature indicate that this model is still extremely popular in the US.

In the UK, play-based assessment has developed along a slightly different path. The earliest reference to the approach appears to be the work of Newson and Newson

(1979) who describe research that uses play to assess a child's 'competence' and outline a play-based assessment technique. Sayeed and Guerin (2000) trace the subsequent development of play-based assessment by EPs in the UK. They begin with Gaussen (1984) who called for new approaches to assessing young children and they then describe Newton's (1988) work to develop clinic-based and classroom-based observations of play. Finally, they highlight Water's (1999) play-based assessment model, which aims to provide a flexible and interactive model incorporating elements of dynamic assessment. As can be seen from Sayeed and Guerin's review, the UK literature is very limited.

1.5.1. The advantages of play-based assessment

Many of the claims about the advantages of play-based assessment relate to the challenges of pre-school assessment outlined earlier in this chapter. They will therefore be considered in relation to the same areas.

Pellegrini (2001) outlines how play is an effective assessment context in that it sustains children's involvement and at the same time gives them opportunities to show their full competence. Play-based assessment has also been described as being particularly accessible for children who would normally be hard to assess or who might be termed 'untestable' (Lidz, 2003; Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001; Waters, 1999). In play-based assessment the child is also engaged in routine and familiar environments where they can feel comfortable and build a rapport with the assessor (Linder, 1990; Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001). Rogers (1982) claims that virtually all areas of development can be observed in a child's play. Lidz (2003) has

described play-based assessment as a “window” to a child’s cognitive, social-emotional, motor and language skills. Mogford-Bevan (2002) adds that it allows the observer to see the ‘leading edge’ of the child’s development because play often focuses on the area of development the child is currently addressing. More recent play-based assessment tools, such as those by Lidz (2003), Sayeed and Guerin (2000) and Waters (1999), have focused on using approaches from dynamic assessment to gain a picture of a young child’s ability to learn with adult support.

Play-based assessments, such as Transdisciplinary Play Based Assessment (TPBA), are often based within multi-professional settings, with professionals observing the child together. Parents also have a key role to play in this and many other forms of play-based assessment, although their degree of involvement varies considerably. Paget (1998) notes the potential of the technique for observing child-caregiver interaction. Finally, in relation to the use that is made of assessment findings, Linder (1990) claims that the information derived from TPBA is ‘functional, process-based and skill-oriented, and relates to the classroom and home’ (p.18).

Play based assessment is often presented in the literature as a solution to the problems of assessing pre-school children and there is generally very little mention of drawbacks. However, some areas of potential difficulty have been identified. For example, Pellegrini (2001) cautions that we have only a limited understanding of function and value of play and stresses the need for caution in interpreting play-based assessments. The flexibility of the approach may also mean that the personal biases of the assessor need to be carefully monitored (Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001).

1.5.2. A framework for play-based assessment tools

There appear to be no existing reviews of the range of play-based assessment models and a framework therefore needs to be devised for the purpose of this review. Foster (1996), in his review of observational techniques, notes the continuum between unstructured 'ethnographic' observations and more structured techniques. In the same way, play-based assessment tools can be placed along a continuum running from naturalistic, unstructured observations to structured and formalised 'tests' of play, and this is the approach that will be used in this review. Towards the centre of this continuum are semi-structured tools that use some degree of structure but at the same time attempt to maintain a more naturalistic approach (see Figure 1.1.).

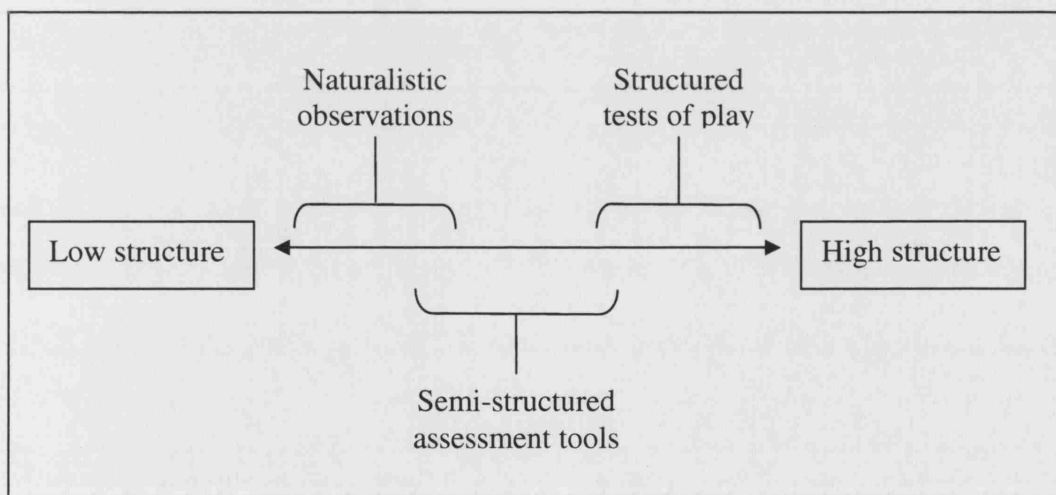


Figure 1.1. A framework for play-based assessment tools

The various types of play-based assessment will now be discussed, before moving on to look at semi-structured tools in more detail (as the tools developed for use by EPs generally fall into this category).

1.5.3. *Naturalistic play-based assessment tools*

Naturalistic observation has a long history in psychology and education, ranging from unstructured observations by practitioners (e.g. Hurst, 1994) to more rigorous, academic observations (e.g. Murphy, 1987; Pellegrini, 1996; Sackett, 1978).

Naturalistic play-based assessment models are underpinned by the belief that children's behaviour should be observed in the environments in which they are expected to show those behaviours if a realistic view of those behaviours is to be obtained (Pellegrini, 1987). In terms of the framework for play-based assessment, these tools have low structure and varying degrees of focus in the areas they assess. Several of these models will be briefly outlined.

The Target Child Observation (Sylva, Roy & Painter, 1980) was designed for observations of children in pre-school settings. It uses a coding system where a child's activity, language, task and social situation are recorded every minute. The codes are then analysed for 'themes' in the child's play. Although this tool was developed some time ago, it is still popular and has recently been included in the Child Psychology Portfolio (Sclare, 1997). A similar approach is the Socio-Cognitive Play Matrix (Pellegrini, 1987; 2001), which has been adapted for educational use from the original model developed by Rubin and colleagues. It focuses on cognitive and social play but is also used as an indicator of more general development. Pellegrini (1987) stresses the naturalistic, ecological nature of the framework and gives a strong theoretical rationale for the choice of observational categories and the need for rigour in observations. However, perhaps the most popular naturalistic model in relation to SEN is Sheridan's work, which was first published in 1973 and provides guides for observations of pre-school children. The

original books have since been updated and republished and 'Play in Early Childhood' (Sheridan, 1999) focuses specifically on observations of play, with play used as an indicator of general development. It provides a developmental sequence of ages and stages in the development of play, based on the personal experience of the author. Generally, it lacks the theoretical rigour of tools like the socio-cognitive play matrix and the nature of the schedule is such that it might be used as a checklist of a child's developmental age, rather than as an observation of play behaviours.

1.5.4. *Structured 'tests' of play*

There are relatively few structured tests of play, and this review will focus on the one mentioned most frequently in the literature – the Symbolic Play Test (Lowe & Costello, 1988). As its name suggests, this is a test situation where four sets of toys are presented to a child according to a tight protocol. The way the child relates the toys to each other is scored using a structured scoring system and scores are then totalled across the four sets of toys to give a 'symbolic play age'. The adult does not intervene beyond giving minimal verbal encouragement and it is unclear how presenting objects in this way relates to real-life play.

1.5.5. *Semi-structured play-based assessment tools*

These tools involve observations in orchestrated situations and are the most common form of play-based assessments used by practising psychologists. They fall at various points between the naturalistic observations and the structured tests of play, depending on the degree of structure, control and standardisation. Various tools will

be briefly reviewed in order of publication, and this will be followed by a more detailed summary of their key features.

Newson (1979) - Play-based observation for assessment of the whole child

This is a very early approach developed by a psychologist working in a university research unit in the UK. Assessment is conducted in a clinic playroom with an observer behind a screen and a wide number of areas of development are covered (e.g. following instructions, reciprocal play, motor skills, communication, social cooperation). The overall aim is to inform 'remediation' activities. This test marks the first point in the development of play-based assessment tools in the UK (Sayeed & Guerin, 2000).

Belsky and Most (1981) - From observation to play.

This tool was developed by researchers in the US who set out to assess the validity of a hypothesised developmental hierarchy of play. They found that the hierarchy was valid but noted that children developed play skills at different ages. They went on to suggest that their research could form the basis of an assessment tool for assessing 'wider functioning'. The technique is quite structured and firmly grounded in developmental psychology. Although it was initially a research technique, it is included in this review because of the way it was conducted (semi-structured observations of play at home with a parent) and the way the authors suggested the findings could be used to assess development. It is also frequently cited as a starting point by authors of other play-based assessment tools (e.g. Lidz, 2003; Mogford-Bevan, 2002).

Coupe and Levy (1985) - The object related scheme assessment procedure

This approach was developed by a teacher and a psychologist working in a special school in the UK. It is a very structured form of play-based assessment where child is presented with specified toys in turn and it has many similarities to Belsky and Most's model. The high level of structure, adult control and lack of interaction may mean that the behaviour it is assessing bears little resemblance to 'real' play. The information obtained from the assessment is used by classteachers to inform teaching – and in this sense it is very grounded in educational practice.

Linder (1990) - Transdisciplinary play-based assessment (TPBA)

This is a key development and one of the best-known models. It focuses on clinic-based assessment using play, with structured and detailed assessments carried out by a range of professionals. It is based within medical models of assessment in the US and provides both qualitative and quantitative information on a range of skills. Much has subsequently been written about this approach and it has received very positive comment, particularly for its focus on play and multi-professional teams.

Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) - Smilansky scale for the evaluation of dramatic and sociodramatic Play

This technique focuses on six aspects of children's social and sociodramatic play – but actually covers quite a wide range of play behaviours. Unusually, it is based around observations of a group of four children, either at an assessment centre or in a natural setting. An exceptionally wide range of toys is used (including home corner and dressing up clothes) and a comprehensive rating guide is used to describe play in

each of the six areas. The tool is notable for the group approach and the narrow, theoretically underpinned focus on a specific area of play.

Smith, Keen and Daley (1996) - PRESAM

This approach was developed in Brent Educational Psychology Service in consultation with a range of professionals from education, health and social services. It appears to be a form of TPBA, although no reference is made to this approach and the authors cite the work of Newson as their basis. A range of professionals are involved in the assessment session, which is carried out in the EPS base/tutorial centre. Areas covered include 'performance skills, language development, behaviour (including social skills) and quality of parent-child interaction'. Details about assessment of these areas are not given, but overall this has much of the feel of TPBA.

Waters (1999) - Let's Play

Let's Play was developed by an EP working in the UK and is based on an earlier play assessment procedure that has since been adapted to include the principles and practice of dynamic assessment (Waters & Stringer, 1997). It is well grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of dynamic assessment and is described as a model of 'interactive assessment'. The assessment aims to give a norm-referenced picture of a child's general development across play with several toys as well as looking at their approach to the assessment situation and their response to mediation by an adult. Assessment can take place in a variety of settings (home, assessment centre and pre-school). The model's strengths appear to lie in the combination of structure and flexibility and the inclusion of elements of dynamic assessment.

Sayeed and Guerin (2000)

This model was developed by EPs working in the UK. The assessment is divided into two sessions – one for observation and one for mediation, and the approach is strong on the theoretical underpinnings of play theory and mediated learning. The tool is criterion referenced, although an earlier version contained elements of developmental comparisons (Sayeed & Guerin, 1997). There is a strong emphasis on issues relating to culture, accessibility and mediated learning. In many ways this approach is quite similar to Let's Play.

Mogford-Bevan (2002) - POKIT

Mogford-Bevan originally worked with Newson (Mogford, 1979) but has since developed her own play-based approach in a UK university. The focus of the tool is on the identification of autistic difficulties, and 'developmental status/delay' and seems to reflect the author's background in speech and language therapy and developmental psychology. It offers a slightly 'medicalised' view of development, presented through a more informal and interactive assessment procedure that includes some qualitative measures. Many areas of development are covered and an exceptionally wide range of professionals, including nursery nurses, EPs and paediatricians, can use the tool. Of particular interest is the use of initial interviews with parents, the consideration of information about the wider context of the child's play, and guidelines for reporting the assessment findings. Detailed administration guidelines are provided.

Lidz (2003) - Object play observation guide

This observation guide is a semi-structured tool developed by a psychologist in the US. Toys are presented to children for set periods of time and responses ‘scored’ according to set categories of response. Qualitative features of the play are also recorded and there is a section on ‘facilitated play’, although this is not described in detail in the guide. A unique aspect of this assessment tool is the contrast between play with familiar and unfamiliar toys.

1.5.6. Summary of semi-structured tools

Details of all of the tools described are given in Table 1.6. As can be seen, they cover a wide range of practices and approaches. At one extreme they are quite similar to structured tests but with a little more flexibility and interaction (e.g. Belsky & Most, 1981; Coupe & Levy, 1985). At the other extreme, there are semi-structured tools that resemble naturalistic observations but use more contrived situations and detailed scoring systems (e.g. Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Somewhere in the middle lie the play-based assessments that many EPs would probably consider typical of the approach. However, the table shows that even these vary greatly in terms of their degree of structure and factors such as the scope of skills assessed, age of participants, role of parents and inclusion of dynamic elements. Clearly, play-based assessment is not a unitary concept.

Table 1.6. Summary of semi-structured play-based assessment tools (Continued on next page)

	Newson: Play-based observation of the Whole child	Belsky and Most: From exploration to play	Coupe and Levy: Object related scheme	Linder: Transdisciplinary play-based assessment	Smilansky and Shefatya: Smilansky scale	Smith et al.: PRESAM	Waters: Let's Play	Sayed and Guerin: Play-based assessment	Mogford-Bevan: POKIT	Lidz: Object play observation guide
Published	1979	1981	1985	1990	1990	1996	1990	2000	2002	2003
Country	UK	US	UK	US	US/Israel	UK	UK	UK	UK	US
Written by	Psychologist working in a university	Academics	Headteacher and EP	Researcher at a university	Researchers at universities in US + Israel	Practising EPs	Practising EP	EPs	University researcher	Consultant/academic psychologist
To be used by	Psychologists	Not specified	Not specified	Health/education professionals	Not specified	EPs and other professionals	EPs and other professionals	Not specified	Wide range e.g. nursery nurse	Not specified
Multi/single professional	Single (?)	Not specified	Not specified	Multi	Not specified	Multi	Single	Single	Can be either	Single
Carried out by	Psychologist (?)	The researchers	Not specified	Facilitator + parents/others	Not specified	A familiar adult (professional)	EP or other professional	Not specified	One of the professionals	Professional plus parent
Setting	Playroom in assessment centre	Home	Not specified - school?	Assessment room/home (sometimes)	Assessment centre/ pre-school	EPS base/ 'tutorial room'	Home/nursery/ assessment centre	Not specified	Not specified	'Private setting'
Areas covered	Imitation, motor, play, cognitive, manipulative, communication	Types of play - manipulation, functional, pretend, relational	Skills at Piaget's sensori-motor stage	Cognitive, language + communication, sensori-motor, social-emotional	Sociodramatic play, pretend, interaction, persistence, communication	Language/social behaviour, performance skills, parent-child interaction	Specific skills across toys, approach to play, response to mediation	Physical, language, cognitive, social, emotional	'developmental level' plus range of skills relating to approach	Play skills, language, social, attention, affective
Age range	Not specified	7.5 - 21 mths (chronological age)	up to 18 mths (dev age)	6mths-6 yrs (dev age)	'Pre-school age'	2 - 5 yrs (chronological age)	'Pre-school age'	Not specified	12 - 48 mths (dev. age)	Not specified
Child population	Not specified	Randomly selected	'Profoundly handicapped'	Range of difficulties	Children in pre-school	Children referred to EP	Range of difficulties	Not specified	Significant 'deviations from normal'	Not specified
Single/multi session	Not specified	Single	Single session	Same session repeated twice	Single (?)	Single session - in two halves	Single	Two sessions within 4 weeks	Single	Single
Role of adult	Engage child, ensure they are comfortable, reward	Does not seem to intervene	Presents the objects; prompts if necessary	Facilitates play	Does not intervene in play	Varies according to session (not much detail given)	Observes and prompts; encourages; acts as mediator	Observes in first session; participates in the second	Play partner	Observer and then facilitator for each toy

	Newson: Play-based observation of the whole child	Belsky and Most: From exploration to play	Coupe and Levy: Object related scheme	Linder: Transdisciplinary play-based assessment	Smilansky and Shafatya: Smilansky scale	Smith et al.: PRESAM	Waters: Let's Play	Sayed and Guerin: Play-based assessment	Mogford-Bevan: POKIT	Lidz: Object play observation guide
Range/type of toys used	Wide range of toys suggested	Toys + objects e.g. seashell, coloured sticks	Range of specified objects	Wide range e.g. sand, home corner, clothes	Wide range e.g. clothes, shop	Not specified	Range of suggested toys	Not specified	Five clearly specified toys	Two key toys selected from a 'toy set'
Single child/or group	Single	Single	Single	Single child but peer joins for one part	Group of four	Single – plan to extend to group setting	Single	Single or group	Single	Single
Norm/criterion referenced	Criterion	Criterion – but norm aspects	Norm and criterion	Norm and criterion	Criterion	Not specified	Norm and criterion	Criterion	Norm and criterion	Criterion
Balance of adult/child directed	Not specified	Structured but minimal adult intervention	Adult directed – very structured	Structured but child leads	Child directed.	Varies – depending on the child	Mainly child directed	Child directed with adult as mediator	Narrow range of toys but it is child directed	Adult directed
Role of parents in assessment	Watch from behind screen with observer	Observe	Not specified	Observe and join in play + discussions	Not specified	Watch - involved in the play at times	Some limited participation	Not specified	Discussions and often play partner	Can act as play facilitator
Learning skills/ dynamic aspects	Yes – quite strong on these	No	Not specified	Observations of teaching of some tasks	Not specified	Not mentioned	Yes – a focus of the assessment	Yes – a focus of the assessment	Yes	Yes
Recording methods	Tape recorded; at least two observers	Narrated by one observer into tape recorder	Video – or observer records	Videoed; panel of observers record	Written observations	Videoed. Schedules not specified	Checklists for each toy and approach to play	Checklist/ recording schedule	Video + detailed checklists	Score sheet for play skills/ qualitative information
Informs intervention	Leads into 'remediation' - no details given	No - purpose is collecting play information	Yes – example given	Programme planning is key element	Yes – but no details given	Used to plan agency's actions	Yes – but no details given	Not specified	Focus is more on diagnosis and feedback	Yes, claims it is linked to intervention
Accessibility (for SEN) discussed?	No	No	Yes, for types of significant SEN	Yes, claims to be very accessible	No	Gives details of difficulties referred	Yes – notably language, autism + motor	No	?	No
Accessibility to range of cultures discussed?	No	No	No	Reference to cultural aspects - no detail	No – but evaluation is based on two cultures	Data on ethnic group referred but not discussed	No	Yes – described as culture-friendly	Acknowledges that this area needs more study	No – advises users find out about cultural backgrounds
Other interesting features	Gives guidelines for engaging child	Not designed as a assessment tool as such		Observation of snacktime	Hebrew version is used in evaluation				Social and communication focus	Includes familiar toys

1.6. Evaluations of play-based assessment tools

This section will focus on the evaluation of semi-structured tools, as these represent all of the models used and developed by EPs. However, it will also refer briefly to evaluations of both naturalistic methods and structured tests of play as a way of exploring further some evaluation issues. Generally, there has been very little research into the effectiveness of play-based assessment (Farmer-Dougan & Kaszuba, 1999; Myers, McBride & Peterson, 1996). Lidz (2003) pays little attention to the evaluation of play-based tools but concludes that the evidence for the validity and reliability of specific approaches is limited. This state of affairs is concerning, particularly given the popularity of the approach and the recognised importance of valid and reliable psychological assessment tools.

Evaluations of naturalistic play-based tools vary considerably. At one extreme, Sheridan (1999) and Sylva *et al.* (1980) do not pay any attention to the validity and reliability of their approaches. In contrast, Pellegrini explicitly looks at the psychometric properties of the Socio-Cognitive Play Matrix (Pellegrini, 1987) and stresses the importance of establishing the reliability and validity of the tool. He describes a wide range of studies that indicate high inter-rater reliability, construct validity for the play categories, concurrent validity with measures of school achievement, and reports ease of use and interpretation. Pellegrini's work is a good example of an evaluation of a play-based assessment tool. There are some areas he does not consider (e.g. test-retest and face validity) but he is very clear about the importance of evaluation. He is willing to acknowledge some of the shortcomings of the matrix, for example it is not good for observing outdoor play or the play of older children (Pellegrini, 2001).

Turning to evaluations of structured tests of play, Lowe and Costello (1988) describe in some detail the development, standardisation and evaluation of the Symbolic Play Test (SPT). They outline 'reasonably high' split-half reliability, good test-retest reliability and high concurrent validity with the Reynell Developmental Language Scales. They claim that the test has good face validity, although they give no evidence to support this claim. The test manual also includes a chapter on studies that have been carried out since the test was first published. These studies look at comparisons between a range of groups (e.g. 'profoundly retarded' and deaf children) and the standardisation sample. Several studies look at validity issues (e.g. correlations between scores and imaginative play and unstructured play) and, once again, positive findings are reported. This test appears to be an example of a well-evaluated structured assessment tool.

Evaluations of semi-structured play-based assessment tools will now be considered. First, the research carried out by the test developers themselves will be examined and secondly external evaluations will be considered. This distinction has been made because 'insufficient self criticism' by the test developer is a source of the limitations of many psychological tools (Cronbach, 1990) and because internal evaluations are likely to be less critical than those by external evaluators.

1.6.1. Evaluations by the developers of semi-structured tools

Newson (1979) - Play based observation of the whole child

Newson makes no reference to evaluation but makes clear that much of the work was still at an experimental stage.

Belsky and Most (1981) - From observation to play

This schedule has a strong emphasis on validity and reliability, which may be a reflection of the authors' academic backgrounds. They claim that various studies have established the validity of the play scale (without detailing them) but acknowledge that further assessment is needed with regard to predictive validity. They do describe a detailed evaluation of test-retest reliability and report correlations of between 0.56 and 0.85 for the different play behaviours in the schedule.

Coupe and Levy (1985) - Object related assessment scheme

The authors describe their assessment tool as 'a simple but effective instrument' but provide no evaluation evidence. They suggest that it is effective because it provides suggestions for teaching and give an illustrative example of how a child's assessment scores were used to plan an intervention programme. As mentioned previously, this is very much a practitioner-based programme and the lack of formal evaluation may reflect this context.

Linder (1990) - Transdisciplinary play-based assessment (TPBA)

Linder is clear about the benefits of her model of play-based assessment over traditional assessment tools but does not include any evidence to support these claims. However, the lack of reliability and validity data is recognised and it is mentioned that studies are underway to address these issues. Test users are reassured that, in the meantime, their observations and judgements will facilitate valuable contributions to intervention planning for children – but no evidence is provided to confirm this.

Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) - Smilansky scale

These authors devote a large section in their paper to information on the development of the scale and its psychometric properties. Research students appear to have carried out many of the studies and therefore these studies have not been published separately. However, Smilansky and Shefatya do give a useful overview of the evaluation research and have clearly been directly involved in much of it.

Interestingly, some of this research was carried out in both Ohio and Tel-Aviv, allowing for cross-cultural comparisons. High inter-rater reliability (correlation of 0.88 for 169 children) is reported and this is replicated for the Hebrew version of the scale (correlations of between 0.84 and 0.87). Good test-retest reliability was found for 20 children on the Hebrew version of the schedule (correlation of 0.84 over a 3 week period). In relation to concurrent validity, correlations between scores and usual play in pre-school were high (0.85 for US children and 0.87 for Israeli children). 'High correlations' were also found between the scale and several other measures, e.g. 'picture reading', teacher ratings of play and 'sociometric standing'. Somewhat lower correlations were found in relation to predictive validity in terms of later academic achievement (0.4 for reading and 0.45 for arithmetic). Smilansky and Shefatya conclude that the scale has been established as valid and reliable for children between the ages of 3 and 8 but note the need for more research with younger children. This is one of the most impressive evaluations in terms of both methodology and findings. However, it should be noted that the schedule has a very narrow focus (one particular aspect of play) and this may enhance its reliability and validity.

Smith, Keen and Daley (1996) - PRESAM

Unlike many of the papers outlined above, this description of a model provides information on the referral profile of children actually assessed (age, gender, difficulty, ethnicity, referral source) and their resulting Code of Practice stage (70% later given a statutory assessment). An evaluation study by Daley is also briefly described in which the views of teachers, medics and parents were collected for 11 PRESAM assessments. In the study, those interviewed found PRESAM a useful form of assessment but no detailed information of these findings is given. The authors also describe how the assessment process was modified as a result of the survey in terms of areas such as making videos available to schools and revising record keeping. Therefore, although there is no evaluation of key areas of reliability and validity, evaluations have been carried out within the context of 'real life' assessments and the model has been modified in the light of these.

Waters (1999) - Let's Play

There is little mention of evaluation in this booklet. Information is given on how the play scales were developed through reviewing and updating existing schedules and it is stressed that the tool has not been standardised on the general population and should therefore only be treated as a guide to a child's development. However, Waters does say that use of the tool since 1992 suggests that the norms are broadly in line with standardised assessment. No further evaluation detail is given, other than to say that the tool has been used very successfully with children with autism. Waters notes that the assessment procedure is still evolving and describes how work is underway to refine the dynamic elements of the tool in order to give it greater

‘scientific rigour’. Overall, most of the claims made about the tool are based on the author’s personal experience rather than evaluation studies

Sayeed and Guerin (2000)

In their initial description of the model, Sayeed and Guerin (1997) acknowledge that no detailed evaluation has been carried out and suggest that this could happen in the future. In their more recent book (Sayeed & Guerin, 2000) the process of developing and refining the model is described. In particular, parents’ and EPs’ perceptions were used to investigate two specific areas: ‘user friendliness’ and ‘perceived usefulness’. They report that the overall response in these two areas was positive and that it led to suggestions for modifying the approach e.g. changes to the scaling system and user guidelines. Once again, they note the need for further research. In summary, Sayeed and Guerin (2000) alert the reader to the need for evaluation and have addressed some issues relating to construct and face validity. However, the tool has not been evaluated in its final form.

Mogford-Bevan (2002) POKIT

This assessment tool has been developed over a long period of time and many of the assessment procedures make reference to ways of enhancing reliability and validity in the light of a detailed study with the normative sample, e.g. guidelines for the unambiguous recording of behaviours, ways to use a second rater, and the importance of checking whether the sample of play is representative of the child’s play skills. There is a chapter in the manual that specifically addresses issues of reliability and validity, and stresses their importance. The literature on the concurrent validity of play and standardised tests is discussed and the need to

establish this for POKIT in the future is recognised. Concurrent validity is established in terms of the range of play behaviours observed in the normative sample and the fact that parents felt they were typical of the children's play. However, it is noted that the developmental play 'norms' established through the normative study do not correspond directly to the age levels in other play checklists. Predictive validity is discussed, but is not felt to be particularly relevant to the tool, as young children show such change over time. In relation to reliability, a small-scale study is reported looking at inter-rater reliability for a group of Speech and Language Therapists. Agreement of 100% was found for the 'diagnosis' of whether children's were 'developmentally delayed', but there was not a high level of agreement for either the behaviour descriptors or the developmental ages. Initial small-scale studies of test-retest reliability are also briefly discussed, with one finding slightly higher performance on a second session, and one finding no difference (no further details are given). Mogford-Bevan notes that no clear conclusions can be drawn about test-retest reliability at this stage. In conclusion, the issues of reliability and validity are given high prominence for POKIT, although the evaluation evidence to date is based only on very small-scale, informal studies.

Lidz (2003) - Object play observation guide

Lidz comments on the need to be cautious about any information derived from a single source of assessment data, including play. She refers to the literature and notes the association between play and other skills but cautions that these relationships are never perfect, do not demonstrate causation, and are not strong in some of the research. Lidz refers to the lack of information about the validity and

reliability of play-based assessment but does not report any evaluations of this particular tool.

1.6.2. *External evaluations of semi-structured tools*

There appear to be only three published external studies that evaluate play-based assessment, and only two of these specifically set out to address this issue. All the studies have been carried out by university researchers in the US. They will be described in detail but can be summarised as follows:

1. Farmer-Dougan and Kaszuba (1999) look at an evaluation of aspects of the reliability and validity of a naturalistic model (similar to the socio-cognitive play matrix).
2. Malone, Stoneman and Langone (1994) do not look specifically at play-based assessment but use play assessment in the same way as many of the semi-structured tools in order to compare play with concurrent measures. They draw conclusions for play-based assessment.
3. Myers, McBride and Peterson (1996) look at an evaluation of the social validity of a semi-structured tool (TPBA).

Study 1: Farmer-Dougan and Kaszuba (1999)

Although this study is an external evaluation of a play-based assessment tool, it focuses on a more naturalistic model. Unfortunately the authors do not describe in detail the model they are evaluating but it appears to be very similar to Pellegrini's socio-cognitive play matrix. Interestingly, the authors mention that the rationale for

the study is the popularity of TPBA but the model evaluated has little in common with TPBA in terms of structure, setting and domains of development assessed. The study is included in this section because it uses TPBA as a rationale and is an external evaluation of both concurrent validity and inter-rater reliability. However, given the nature of the study, it is not directly relevant to semi-structured assessment tools. A brief outline of this study is given in Table 1.7.

Table 1.7. Play-based assessment evaluation – study 1 (Farmer-Dougan & Kaszuba, 1999)

Reliability and validity of play-based observations: relationship between the PLAY behaviour observation system and standardised measure of cognitive and social skills

Farmer-Dougan and Kaszuba (1999) - Department of Psychology at Illinois State University

Rationale

- Lack of published investigations into reliability and validity.

Play-based assessment tool evaluated

The 'PLAY observation system'.

Focus

- Comparison of the PLAY observation system with a standardised cognitive assessment (Battelle Developmental Inventory) and with a teacher rating scale of social skills (concurrent validity).
- Comparison of ratings in PLAY observation system between raters (inter-rater reliability).

Participants

- 42 pre-school children aged 3-5.

Findings

- Inter-rater agreement 80-100% (mean 92%) across all observations.
- Concurrent agreement with cognitive assessment and ratings of social skills.

Limitations discussed

- Small and possibly unrepresentative sample of children.
- Teacher ratings may be affected by knowledge of children/ honesty of responses.

Conclusions

- 'Play-based assessment can provide a meaningful assessment of cognitive and social abilities'.

Notwithstanding its tenuous relevance to semi-structured tools, several key points can be made about this study:

- the sample of children did not have difficulties/SEN;
- the descriptors of the play categories are used as true numeric values for data analysis, in a way that is inappropriate for categorical data; and
- the study assumes that the standardised inventory is a good, 'true' validity measure of cognitive skills.

Nevertheless, the study does throw light on concurrent validity and inter-rater reliability and possible ways in which these may be investigated. It also appears to support Pellegrini's own findings about the good validity and reliability of the Socio-Cognitive Play Matrix as an assessment tool.

Study 2: Malone, Stoneman and Langone (1994)

As mentioned previously, this study did not look specifically at play-based assessment and will therefore be only briefly discussed. It was carried out by researchers at the University of Georgia and set out to investigate the correlation between performance on a standardised cognitive assessment tool (Battelle Developmental Inventory) and two play situations (independent play at home and free play in preschool). The play situation at home consisted of the presentation of three sets of symbolic play toys with the observer recording the child's play on each for 10 minutes. The participants were 22 pre-school children with 'mild' to 'moderate' difficulties. In these ways it was very like a semi-structured play-based assessment context. The study found that that cognitive/ developmental score on the

standardised inventory related more closely to play in the home-based situation than to play observed in pre-school. This study is important because there was an attempt to control variables across situations (e.g. similar levels of adult intervention and the same observers across the play and pre-school observations). The authors recommend that when using play for assessment, more valid information can be obtained through independent play at home than through observations of play in pre-school.

Study 3: Myers, McBride and Peterson (1996)

This is probably the key external evaluation of a play-based assessment tool, in that it explicitly set out to evaluate a semi-structured tool. An outline of this study is given in Table 1.8. Several points can be made about this evaluation. Generally, it is very embedded in the US assessment context, e.g. 'referral for special educational assessment'. It looks only at one aspect of validity (social/face validity), although it does examine this from different viewpoints and the authors do acknowledge that this alone is not sufficient to establish validity. Generally, little information is given on the design of questionnaires, rating scales etc., and the use of subjective, norm-referenced categories may provide very crude measures for establishing inter-rater reliability, as users may record their view of the child rather than the behaviour seen. In terms of strengths, the use of a transdisciplinary assessment process in the comparison situation helped to control for the influence of the multi-agency element. However, the authors do not explain in detail how they controlled for other variables between the two situations. Interestingly, although this study found evidence of face validity, the play-based approach did not have a great advantage over standard transdisciplinary assessment.

Table 1.8. Play-based assessment evaluation – study 3 (Myers, McBride & Peterson, 1996)

Transdisciplinary, play-based assessment in early childhood special education: an examination of social validity

Myers, McBride and Peterson (1996) Department of psychology at Western Kentucky and Iowa State Universities.

Rationale

- Widespread use TPBA without evidence to document its validity.
- Importance of social validity of assessment tools – and TPBA in particular because of the involvement of parents.

Play-based assessment tool evaluated

Transdisciplinary play-based assessment (they refer to Linder's model as basis).

Focus

Social validity measures:

- Consumer feedback from parents and professionals (structured questionnaires about views of the assessment process).
 - Time spent on the assessment.
 - Evaluation of written reports (blind evaluation by independent evaluators).
- Inter-rater agreement:
- Staff and parent ratings of the child's developmental level across several domains (scales were norm referenced eg 'typical development', 'moderate delay').

Participants

- 40 children under 3 years (average age 22.5 months) who had been 'referred for special education evaluation'. Children randomly assigned to either standard transdisciplinary assessment or TPBA.

Findings

- Parents rated TPBA highly but no significant difference to standardised assessment.
- Staff rated TPBA as significantly more informative on communication, social and motor skills – but not other areas of development.
- Psychologists and Speech therapists rated TPBA as particularly useful.
- TPBA took less time to complete.
- TPBA reports rated more highly in some respects but not all.
- Inter-rater agreement high for TPBA but also for standardised assessments.

Limitations discussed

- Small and possibly unrepresentative sample of children.
- Same team members in both assessments – may have been biased by own beliefs about each type.
- Parents' ratings of standardised assessments may have resulted in higher ratings because not usually asked to have such input.

Conclusions

- There is evidence from various sources of the social validity of TPBA.

Further study recommended

- More research needed to refine who finds what useful.

Unpublished studies

Despite lack of published studies, there have been several interesting dissertations involving the evaluation of play-based assessment tools. These will now be briefly reviewed from their abstracts.

Friedli (1995) carried out a study that aimed to provide preliminary findings on the reliability and validity of TPBA using measures of association, agreement coefficients and kappa values. Good concurrent validity was found with the Battelle Developmental Inventory (BDI) for a sample of 20 children with and without difficulties, and test-retest reliability was also reported to be good for a smaller sample of 10 children. Cornett (1999) also evaluated TPBA for a sample of children with 'high, typical and low' scores on the BDI and found that inter-rater reliability was good only for objective coding categories and not for open-ended categories. Concurrent validity was also investigated and, in contrast with Friedli's findings, no relationship was found between scores and the BDI. Dudley (2001) looked at the social and 'treatment' validity of a play-based assessment tool (details of the tool are not given). 186 school psychologists and 139 preschool educators took part and participants felt that both standardised/norm-referenced and play-based approaches were important in the assessment of preschool children. The majority of participants felt that play-based assessment had social validity and that it could help to bridge the gap between assessment and intervention. Finally, Anthony (2003) designed a new section on visual development to add to the TPBA model and assessed the validity and reliability of this new element. External experts and qualitative data confirmed 'appropriate' content validity and inter-rater reliability was established for a sample of 10 children (with and without difficulties) using four independent raters.

1.6.3. *Summary of evaluations of semi-structured tools*

The pattern of evaluation by test developers appears variable, with many developers of play-based assessment tools not addressing the need for evaluation. Generally, it seems that evaluation is given more prominence by researchers than practitioners and this may be a reflection of differences in the perceived importance of evaluation and the amount of time available for this type of research. Similarly, there are a very small number of external evaluations of semi-structured tools. This lack of research is acknowledged by many but has persisted, despite recognition of the complexities of pre-school assessment and the need for very careful selection of tools. Much of the research that has been carried out is US based, and as such considers a very different Special Educational Needs and assessment context. It has also focused on evaluations of TPBA, which is unlike many of the other forms of semi-structured assessment. Finally, several of the studies lack rigour in terms of areas such as sample size, analysis of categorical data and the inclusion of children who do not have difficulties.

The studies described have covered various aspects of reliability and validity across various assessment tools. Tables 1.9. and 1.10. provide summaries of all the research areas examined so far.

Table 1.9. Evaluations of the validity and reliability of semi-structured tools - by developers

	Newson: Play-based observation of the whole child	Belsky and Most: From exploration to play	Coupe and Levy: Object related scheme	Linder: Transdiscipli nary play- based assessment	Smilansky and Shefatya: Smilansky scale	Smith et al: PRESAM	Waters: Let's Play	Sayed and Guerin: Play-based assessment	Mogford- Bevan: POKIT	Lidz: Object play observation guide
Test-retest reliability	X	✓	X	X	✓	X	X	X	✓	X
Inter-rater reliability	X	X	X	X	✓	X	X	X	✓	X
Content/ Construct	X	?	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X
Concurrent validity	X	?	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X
Predictive validity	X	?	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X
Face validity	X	?	X	X	X	✓	X	✓	X	X

Table 1.10. Evaluations of the validity and reliability of semi-structured tools - external evaluations

	Myers <i>et al.</i> (1996)	Farmer- Dougan & Kaszuba (1999)	Friedli (1995) - dissertation	Cornett (1999) - dissertation	Dudley (2001) - dissertation	Anthony (2003) - dissertation
Tool evaluated	TPBA	PLAY observation system	TPBA	TPBA	(Not stated)	TPBA
Test-retest reliability	X	X	✓	✓	X	X
Inter-rater reliability	X	✓	X	X	X	✓
Content/ Construct	X	X	X	X	X	✓
Concurrent validity	X	✓	✓	✓	X	X
Predictive validity	X	X	X	X	X	X
Face validity	✓	X	X	X	✓	X

✓ Some evaluation carried out
 X No evaluation carried out
 ? Unclear whether or not
 evaluation has been carried
 out

As can be seen, TPBA is the most evaluated semi-structured tool and construct and predictive validity have received very little attention. There have been no external evaluations of any of the UK tools, and the evaluations that have been carried out by UK based test developers have looked only at face validity. There is therefore a need for evaluations of UK tools within the context of UK assessments of pre-school children with SEN. There is also a need to explore in more detail many of the aspects of reliability and validity for which only fragmented and sometimes inconsistent research evidence exists.

1.7. Summary of the literature review

Play is considered an important feature of childhood and a key indicator of a wide range of developmental skills. Play has been shown to follow developmental sequences and various differences have been observed in the play of children with SEN. In recent times, play-based assessment has emerged as a way of overcoming some of the challenges of pre-school assessment and a range of play-based models that vary in terms of their structure and focus have been developed. Semi-structured tools are particularly popular amongst practising EPs. Despite this popularity, and the recognised importance of test evaluation within psychology, there has been very little evaluation of play-based tools, especially semi-structured tools and tools used in the UK. The evaluations carried out by UK test developers have focused mainly on face validity and therefore a clear picture of reliability and validity has yet to be established for many of the tools.

This raises concerns that EPs are using tools that have undergone little or no evaluation. These tools are used to represent a child's psychological skills and difficulties and are also often a factor in decisions about programmes of support and provision. As such, more research is needed to establish the usefulness of play-based assessment tools and identify their potential strengths and limitations.

1.8. Rationale for the study

The question this study addressed is whether play-based assessment is a useful tool for EPs in their assessments of young children. It focused on semi-structured approaches, as the literature review indicates that these are the tools developed for use by EPs. The aim of the study was to gain an overall picture of the reliability and validity of one tool, based on the criteria for effective tools outlined in the literature. This information would then be used to gain an initial impression of the place of the tool within assessment practice and its usefulness for Educational Psychologists.

1.8.1. *Let's Play*

Let's Play (Waters, 1999) was chosen as the play-based assessment tool for the study. It appears to be a popular tool amongst EPs in the UK and was used by the researcher in day-to-day work. It was developed recently by a practising EP in the UK in the context of her work as an early years specialist, and meets many of the features of a 'typical' play-based approach:

- it contains elements of both structured and naturalistic approaches and therefore lies somewhere towards the centre of the continuum of play-based tools – it can therefore provide information about structured and naturalistic elements;
- it contains interactive and dynamic assessment elements – and can therefore be viewed as one of the most up-to-date conceptualisations of play-based assessment;
- it is a tool that was developed as a result of concerns about the limitations of traditional standardised assessments and was explicitly designed to be accessible to a wide range of young children; and
- it meets all the key features of play-based assessment tools outlined by Lidz (2003).

As discussed in the literature review, Let's Play does not appear to have been evaluated to date. There is no reference to evaluation in the manual, and no external evaluations have been carried out.

Full details of Let's Play are contained in the handbook (Waters, 1999) but it may be helpful to the reader if a brief overview is provided at this stage. The key characteristics and underpinnings have already been outlined in the literature review (see page 45 and 48-49). The details of the various elements of the assessment tool will now be outlined, in terms of the three 'Guides' that make up Let's Play.

GUIDE 1: Developmental assessment through play

This section provides lists of play behaviours that might be observed for specified toys. For each toy the behaviours are allocated developmental age ranges and ordered in a developmental sequence. Waters suggests that these can be used for the norm referencing of behaviours, for establishing a baseline of skills, for comparing different areas of skill, and for gaining information on how the child learns.

GUIDE 2: Observation of learner behaviour/record of intervention in play

The first part of this Guide focuses on the child's approach to the play situation through a checklist of specific behaviours in three main areas - affective factors, interaction during assessment and approach to tasks. The second part focuses on using a dynamic assessment approach to look at interventions to support the child's approach to learning. A grid is provided for recording the type of support and response of the child in relation to each of the areas listed in part one.

GUIDE 3: Mediation with young children.

This section gives a list of approaches to mediation that can be used in the play session. Waters recommends that those who use this section are already familiar with dynamic assessment approaches

A list of suggested toys for the assessment is provided but assessors are also free to select their own. The suggested toys have been selected on the basis of their appeal to children of different ages, their use in demonstrating early learning concepts, their ability to be used in a flexible way, and their practicality and availability. Each toy on the list has a corresponding developmental sequence of play behaviours in

Guide 1. (Appendix 1 contains a full list of the toys used in Let's Play, along with the abbreviations used for each toy in this report). Waters stresses that the procedure for conducting a play-based assessment session is not rigid and does not follow a standard script – it requires a degree of sensitivity and flexibility. However, she says that a degree of structure is helpful and provides an outline procedure (see Appendix 2).

1.8.2. *Using Let's Play in the study*

In the study it was decided to focus on only Guide 1, in order to keep the study focused and manageable within the constraints of time and resources. This Guide was chosen because it is the part of the assessment that is core to all models of play-based assessment and this would aid the generalisability of the findings. Also, as Waters herself notes, norm-referencing of skills and obtaining a quantitative picture of a child's existing skills are the most common purposes for which the assessment is used by EPs. Finally, Waters also comments that she is working on developing and refining the dynamic elements of the scale in order to provide 'a greater degree of scientific rigour', and therefore work is already underway on developing this aspect of the model.

1.8.3. *The evaluation criteria*

The literature review highlighted Anastasi's (1990) 'suggested outline for test evaluation' as a schedule that contained the basic evaluation elements applicable to formal and informal tests. From this overall framework it was planned that the study

would focus on the technical criteria relevant to play-based assessment (i.e. those identified as pertinent in the literature and relevant to tools assessing discrete levels of development). The key criteria selected were:

1. *Test-retest reliability* – particularly important given concerns about young children’s inconsistent response in assessment situations.
2. *Inter-rater reliability* - important because of the recognised effects of observer bias on observation data.
3. *Concurrent validity* – a key area of study in the research carried out to date and important in establishing the relevance of the assessment tool.
4. *Construct validity* – important because the assessment involves the complex concept of play.

The overall aim was to use a reasonable spread of criteria across validity and reliability, to include areas covered in previous evaluations, and at the same time keep the study manageable.

As a result of the decisions outlined above, the main research questions were:

Does Let’s Play have:

- Test-retest reliability (criterion 1, for the purposes of the study)?
- Inter-rater reliability (criterion 2, for the purposes of the study)?
- Concurrent validity (criterion 3, for the purposes of the study)?
- Construct validity (criterion 4, for the purposes of the study)?

- and what does this information tell us about Let’s Play as an effective tool for EPs, and about play-based assessment more generally?

For each of the criteria, it was envisaged that various measures of agreement could be obtained from the study. However, this in itself would not answer the research questions relating to the usefulness of Let's Play and it was therefore important to clarify in more detail the theoretical questions that underpinned each criterion measure. Uebersax (2001-2003) has written specifically on the issue of the analysis of inter-rater agreement and stresses the importance of clearly identifying the purpose of such an analysis. He cautions against the common mistake of not having clear purpose when analysing agreement data and urges researchers to be clear about why this agreement is important from a theoretical standpoint. Therefore, for this study, the theoretical questions behind the investigations were considered at the outset.

Additional questions related to test-retest reliability

- Are there any indications that children behave differently in the two sessions, or that the researcher is observing and coding the behaviours differently?
- Are the ratings on some toys or for some children more consistent than for others? Why might this be the case?
- What implications do the findings have for the use of Let's Play and for play-based assessment generally in terms of children's performance over sessions and time?

Additional questions related to inter-rater reliability

- If EPs do not code sessions in the same way, are there any indications of what may be causing this?
- Are the ratings for some toys or some children more consistent across the raters? Why might this be the case?
- What implications do the findings have for the use of Let's Play and for play-based assessment generally in terms of gaining a 'true' picture of the child's skills?

Additional questions related to concurrent validity

- What is the pattern of concurrent agreement across Let's Play, a formal test of play and children's play in everyday situations? What does this tell us about the behaviours children show in the assessment situation?
- Are some children's behaviours in the Let's Play assessment more closely related to play in other situations?
- What implications do the findings have for the use of Let's Play and for play-based assessment generally in terms of providing a valid measure of a child's play skills?

Additional questions related to construct validity

- Is the behaviour shown in Let's Play really 'play'?
- Does Let's Play provide an accurate summary of this play? Do raters record the behaviour accurately, and does Let's Play cover all relevant aspects of their play behaviour?

Additional questions related to all the criteria

- Are the findings for each criterion sufficient for the purposes for which Let's Play (Guide 1) is used by EPs?
- How do the findings for this Guide relate to the tool as a whole (Guides 1, 2 and 3)?
- How do the findings relate to previous evaluation studies and to the research on play and assessment more generally?
- What are the practice implications for EPs using Let's Play?

1.8.4. The overall framework for the study

The overall framework for the study is summarised in Figure 1.2.

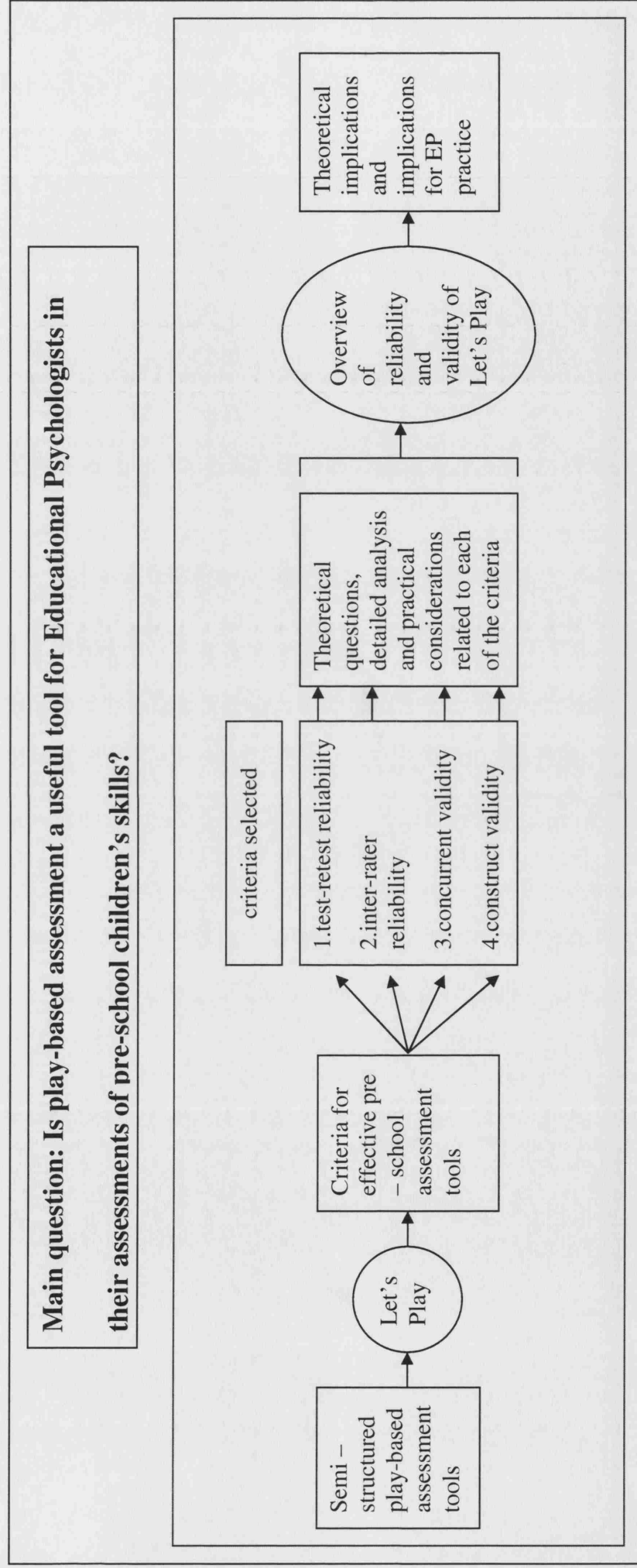


Figure 1.2. The overall framework for the study

CHAPTER 2

PILOT STUDY

2.1. Rationale and aims of the pilot study

The pilot study was designed for several purposes but the overall aim was to prepare the way for the main study. The pilot study was in many ways a smaller version of the proposed model for the main study.

The pilot study had three key aims:

Aim 1. To assess the usefulness of the chosen evaluation framework, in particular

- the suitability of Let's Play as the focus of the main study; and
- the suitability of the test evaluation framework (the four key criteria) for evaluating Let's Play.

Aim 2. To trial the measures through which Let's Play would be evaluated, in particular

- the effectiveness of data collection methods in gathering information on reliability and validity;
- the manageability of data collection within the time and resources available; and
- data analysis techniques.

Aim 3. To gain an initial impression of the reliability and validity of Let's Play, in order to assess whether this is an appropriate focus for the main study and worth investigating further.

Five children for whom EP involvement had been requested were given two Let's Play assessments on two separate occasions. The first assessment session was videoed for later analysis. The children were also given a formal test of play and parents and pre-school staff also completed questionnaires about play in normal day-to-day situations. A range of data from these sources was used to gain an initial picture of the reliability and validity of the tool (see Table 2.1.).

Table 2.1. Information sources for each of the pilot study criteria

Evaluation measure	Information collected for each child
Test-retest reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher's scores of play-based assessment session 1. • Researcher's scores of play-based assessment session 2.
Inter-rater reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EP 1's scores of a video of assessment session 1. • EP 2's scores of a video of assessment session 1.
Concurrent validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher's scores of play-based assessment session 1. • Parent's scores on the assessment schedule, based on child's play at home. • Pre-school staff's scores on the assessment schedule, based on child's play at pre-school. • Researcher's scores on the Symbolic Play Test.
Construct validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparison of the child's play in the assessment with play criteria in the literature. • Overall patterns from all the information listed above.

2.2. Method

2.2.1. *Participants*

Five pre-school children took part in the pilot study. The researcher had already met all the children and their parents as part of regular EP 'casework' in collaboration with the local Pre-School Teacher. However, no direct educational psychology involvement had been carried out for any of the children before the start of the study. This group of children represented all the new requests for pre-school assessment for the researcher in one term. Therefore the pilot sample represented a 'true' selection of the pre-school children EPs would be working with over a short time period. Although this was a small sample, it was felt that it would provide sufficient information for the pilot study.

All the participants came from a small town and its surrounding villages. Their ages ranged from 3 years 6 months to 4 years 7 months with an average age of 4 years 1 month. Four of the five children were attending a pre-school setting, all private or voluntary funded. All of the children were at Early Years Action Plus of the Code of Practice, although for one child a request for statutory assessment was about to be made (child 2). They were also all due to attend their local school. In relation to their main areas of difficulty, two of the children had language difficulties, two had social/ communication difficulties and one child showed withdrawn behaviour.

2.2.2. Ethical considerations

As the study was based around everyday EP practice, ethical considerations were considered in the light of two areas of research - the British Psychological Society guidelines for ethical conduct in relation to research (BPS, 2000) and the literature on ethical practice for EPs in their day-to-day work (e.g. Webster & Bond, 2002). Many elements of the study were based on normal professional practice principles and service policies and as such were guided by the ethics underpinning day-to day EP practice. Carrington, Griffiths, Hollis and Parry (2002) note that for practising EPs ethical considerations go beyond the general guidelines given in professional codes such as the BPS guidelines, and that EP work consists of a wide range of ethical considerations and dilemmas. Fox and Rendall (2002) have looked specifically at how the BPS Code of Conduct and more general ethical considerations come together and note that because the dominant discourses in the Code are centred around university based research, further consideration needs to be given to the ethical issues encountered by practising EPs engaging in research. The various ethical considerations for the study will now be considered in the light of the literature.

Firstly, the study was conducted within the context of service and professional guidelines for quality assessment (as outlined in chapter 1). Franey (2002) notes that 'testing' by EPs involves many ethical considerations arising from the potential misuse of tests and the way in which assessment information is used. The assessments conducted in the study were therefore used with appropriate professional care and respect for the participants and were embedded in a meaningful assessment cycle with outcomes that were shared, positively framed and which aimed to be

helpful in guiding intervention. They also adhered to the professional principles for EP practice outlined by Webster and Bond (2002). These include respect for individual's autonomy, taking action that benefit 'clients', and building trusting relationships with 'clients'.

Informed consent is a key principle of the BPS guidelines and all the parents had already agreed to EP involvement and had previously signed the EP service's standard consent form (see Appendix 3). This form detailed the reason for EP involvement and was completed by the EP in consultation with the parents and Pre-school Teacher. For all the children the reason for involvement was to gain an initial picture of educational strengths and needs prior to starting school. Parents were invited to contribute their own views in one section of the form and were asked to sign to give their consent for EP involvement. At the initial meeting, the researcher gave parents a verbal outline of the study and asked them whether they would like to participate. It was made clear that the study would involve only assessments that EPs would regularly use as part of their practice, but that it would involve more assessment sessions than would be usual. It was also made clear that there was a choice whether to take part and that normal EP involvement could continue if parents did not want to be part of the study (to ensure that there was no pressure to take part, as per the BPS guidelines). All the parents agreed to take part, and so at this stage there was no selection bias. On obtaining this agreement, no further written consent was obtained, as parents had already signed the consent form and would also be present at all of the assessments. In this first home visit, the researcher recapped the purpose of the study and gave parents a letter thanking them for their involvement and detailing key areas such as their right to withdraw and confidentiality (see

Appendix 4). The BPS guidelines state that participants should have as full as possible information about all aspects of the study that could affect their participation, and this includes the types of information outlined above. On the issues of the participants' consent and the right to withdraw, the study presented particular issues, given that it involved the testing of young children. The BPS guidelines state that if a child avoids the test situation then this should be taken as them withdrawing their consent – and therefore if children did not want to play with Let's Play or the Symbolic Play Test they would not be pressured to do so (as would be the case in normal EP practice).

The study was conducted very much in partnership with parents and this reflected the normal 'style' of EP work and the BPS guidelines on the active collaboration of participants. These elements were particularly important given the ethical issues raised by Fox and Rendall (2002) about the tendency for EP research to focus on groups of people who are disempowered in various ways. It was considered vital that the study was a positive and empowering process for both parents and children. Parents were present in all the assessments and were also encouraged to ask any questions they might have or express any views. In the second home visit parents were given initial verbal feed back on the findings for their child, so that they could discuss them with the researcher. At the end of the study a Record of Involvement was also written for each child and sent to parents and the Pre-school Teacher. This outlined the child's performance across the assessments and also in view of the wider issues for which the researcher had been involved as link EP, e.g. strategies for supporting in pre-school or likely needs on school entry. It was felt important to provide this written feedback in order to adhere to professional standards of reporting

assessment findings and to give parents a tangible end product for their involvement. In this particular study the feedback included an element of advice, but as this was a key element of the assessment process, this did not involve the potential for ethical conflict outlined in the BPS guidelines.

The general ethical considerations outlined above for parents were also applied to the researcher's contact with other professionals. Pre-school staff were contacted by letter to request their participation (see Appendix 5) and this letter outlined the researcher's role, the nature of the study and the nature of the help being requested. Pre-schools were not contacted without parental consent (all the parents gave this).

2.2.3. Data collection

Two home visits were made to each child and the aim was to have a maximum of four weeks between the visits. This is in line with Anastasi (1990) who cautions that for young children developmental changes can be evident over a month or less, and therefore recommends that intervals are kept as short as possible for test-retest measures. This interval was also broadly in line with the time intervals in previous evaluation studies (e.g. Smilansky & Shafatya, 1990). It was planned that all the parent and pre-school data collection would take place between the two home visits. An activity record sheet was used to organize the data collection activities and to track and record progress with data collection for each child (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2. Data collection schedule – pilot study

	Home visit1 (With Pre-school Teacher)	Intervening period (max. 4 weeks)	Home visit 2 (alone)	Follow up activities
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain study and EP role to parents • Give parents consent letter 			
Test-retest reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out play-based assessment (Pre-school teacher to video) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out second play-based assessment 	
Construct validity			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administer Symbolic Play Test 	
Concurrent validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give parents Let's Play record form to complete before next visit. • Gain parental consent to contact pre-school group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send copy of schedule to the pre-school group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect record form from parents <i>or</i> ask them to complete it during the visit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect completed form from nursery (if necessary)
Inter-rater reliability				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EP 1 watches video of p-ba and rates child on record form. • EP 2 watches video of p-ba and rates child on record form.
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make date for second visit 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide verbal feedback to parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brief record of involvement sent to parents

The procedures outlined in the Let's Play manual (Guide 1) were followed and the listed set of toys was used. For ease of administration, copies of the observation schedules provided in the Let's Play manual were copied for each rater and a rater-specific front sheet was attached. The front sheet explained the outline of the study and gave directions specific to each type of rater, i.e. researcher, EP, pre-school or parent (see appendices 6, 7 & 9). The observation sheets differed slightly from those used in the Let's Play manual in that the age norms were removed. This was felt necessary because of the potential difficulties in giving pre-schools and parents schedules with clear expectations of 'normal' developmental levels, as highlighted in the earlier discussion of the evaluation of inter-rater reliability by Myers *et al.* (1996).

2.2.4. Method for each of the criteria

Criterion 1: Test retest reliability

The first Let's Play assessment was carried out and 'scored' by the researcher during the first home visit. The second was carried out in the same way, a maximum of four weeks later. The ratings sheets across the two assessment sessions were then compared. It is important to note that for the purposes of direct comparison across toys, only those toys played with in the first session were used in the second session.

Criterion 2: Inter-rater reliability

The first Let's Play assessment session was videoed by the Pre-school Teacher. The child and family already knew this teacher, and this hopefully made the videoing less intrusive. The videotapes were viewed by two different EPs, who independently

scored the child's performance. These ratings were then compared with those obtained by the researcher in the first assessment session. Two EP raters were needed so that their ratings could be compared with those of the researcher and also with each other, as it was felt that watching the videos as an observer might be very different to rating the child's behaviour when conducting the assessment. This allowed for a three way inter-rater matrix to explore the various dimensions of inter-rater reliability (see Figure 2.1.).

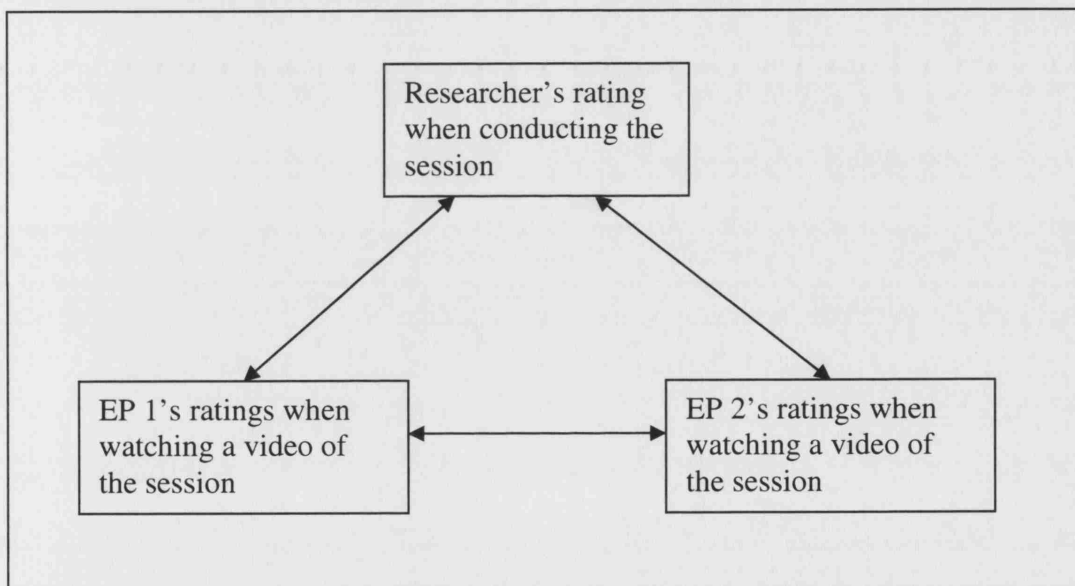


Figure 2.1. Inter-rater matrix

The EPs rating the video were recruited from the researcher's colleagues. EPs were given the tape, the scoring schedule and a letter explaining the study, thanking them for their involvement and explaining how to do the rankings (see Appendix 6). In

order to ensure that the 'real' assessment situation was replicated, EPs were given instructions to watch the video only once and without pauses. The choice of whether to score during the assessment or at the end was left to the EP (as with a 'real' Let's Play assessment).

Criterion 3: Concurrent validity

The children's ratings in the Let's Play assessment session were compared with both their play in everyday situations and their play on a formal test of play. It was anticipated that these areas would allow comparisons of play across both naturalistic and structured situations. Two measures of play in everyday situations were obtained:

- A comparison with the child's behaviour on the first Let's Play session and their play in pre-school. Pre-school staff were asked to complete a Let's Play record form, based on the behaviour they had observed in the pre-school with the same toys. The instructions made it clear that only behaviours actually observed should be recorded but that it did not matter how long ago this may have been. The pre-schools were asked to return the record sheet in a stamped and addressed envelope.
- A comparison with the child's behaviour on the first Let's Play session and their usual behaviour at home. At the first home visit, parents were asked to complete a Let's Play record sheet based on the behaviours they observed at home with the same toys. Once again, the instructions were to include only behaviours actually observed, however long ago. The researcher collected

the completed record sheets during the second home visit (or asked parents to complete them during that visit).

The study used the Symbolic Play Test (SPT) as a second comparison for concurrent validity. This was chosen as a measure of structured play because it is reasonably well known, has good reliability and validity data (as described in Chapter 1) and is considered a valid measure of the construct of 'play'. However, this test gives a measure of only symbolic play, rather than skills across many domains, as is the case with Let's Play. Therefore, only the two symbolic elements of Let's Play (large toys and miniatures) were compared with this test. The SPT was administered at the end of the second home visit, after the second Let's Play assessment. It was felt that the second visit was the most appropriate time for this test because too much assessment during the first visit could be stressful for parents and the child and would not allow sufficient time for introductions and explanations of the study.

Criterion 4: Construct Validity

This measure did not require any additional data collection. The child's performance on Let's Play could be compared to their play in real life situations and on the Symbolic Play Test and any differences or similarities would be considered within the context of play theory.

2.2.5. Data analysis methods

Comparing the scores across Let's Play provided certain challenges due to the complexities of the scoring system. For each toy played with, the developmental age of the highest play behaviour shown was taken to represent the child's developmental level on that toy (as is the usual process in Let's Play). However, these levels are often given in terms of age ranges rather than a specific age. There are also different age ranges and age steps for each toy (see Appendix 9 for examples of the Let's Play developmental levels for the large toys and form board). Due to these complexities, a decision was made to transform the various age categories into approximate developmental ages. In order to keep the transformations consistent, a conversion table was drawn up (see Appendix 10).

An important point to remember at this stage is that in Let's Play each child obtains a developmental age for each toy played with - it does not purport to provide an overall 'developmental level' across the various toys. Rather, performance on individual toys is used to gain a profile of the child's strengths and weaknesses. In the pilot study, correlations were used to look at the association between the two sets of ratings, e.g. performance on a range of toys in session 1 and across the same toys in session 2.

2.3. Results for each of the evaluation criteria

2.3.1. Criterion 1: *Test-retest reliability*

Due to difficulties in arranging mutually agreeable times, it was not possible to adhere to the desired timing for the assessments. The time interval between the first and second visits ranged from between 17 and 42 days, with an average interval of 28 days. In some cases (in particular, child 4) the time between the two assessments was considerably longer than the desired four weeks, and it was possible that some maturation and development could have taken place over the time period. The overall association between the two assessment situations across all the toys and all the children are shown in Table 2.3.

Of the 28 pairs of scores, 14 (50%) agreed perfectly, 10 (36%) were higher on the second session, and 4 (14%) were lower. The magnitude of the differences varied from 3 to 24 months and the range of the difference was between +24 months and -24 months on the second session.

The test-retest correlation using Pearson's r was significant ($r = 0.66, p < 0.01$). The association is shown graphically in Figure 2.2.

Table 2.3. Test-retest agreement summary table (differences given in developmental levels in months)

	large	min	lock	form	lotto	shape	abacus	cray	brick	beak	ball	book
Child 1	+ 6	+12	0		0		-3	+6			0	-3
Child 2	0	-6					+24	+6				
Child 3	- 24						0	+3				
Child 4	0	0	0	0			0		0			
Child 5	+6	+6		0	+12		0	0		+9		

Positive numbers indicate higher ratings on second assessment session

Negative numbers indicate lower ratings on second assessment session

0 indicates exact agreement between the two scores

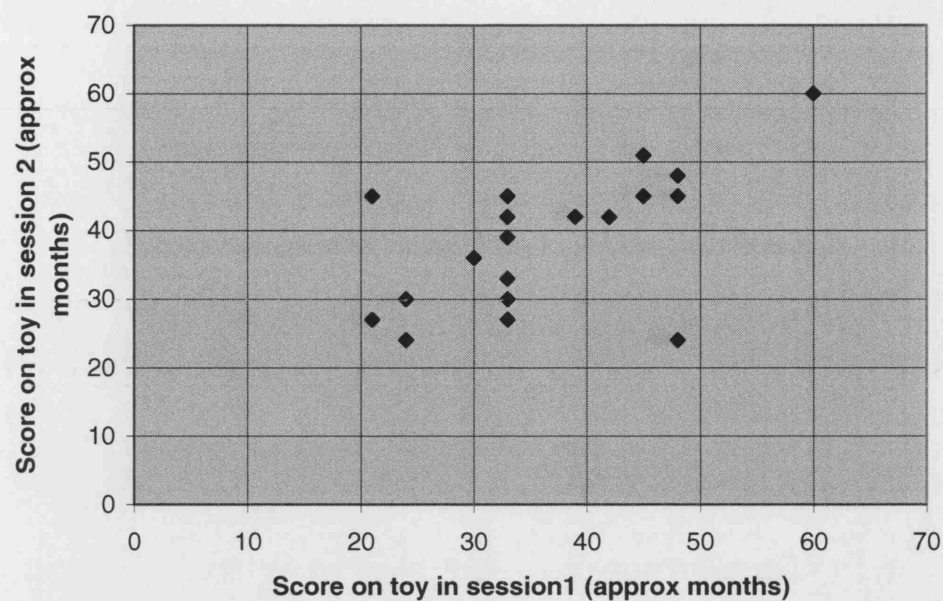


Figure 2.2. Test-retest association

2.3.2. Criterion 2: Inter-rater reliability

It was not possible to collect any data for this measure, due to the difficulties in enlisting and arranging help from EPs. When EPs did offer to help, they found it difficult to find time to watch the videos.

2.3.3. Criterion 3: Concurrent validity

Comparison with play at home

All the parents completed the record sheet but the time interval between the first Let's Play session and the parents completing their record sheet varied from 0 to 31 days. The agreement between Let's Play and the parents' ratings is summarised in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4. Concurrent validity summary table (differences between Let's Play and parent's developmental levels in months)

	Sym Ply	min	lock	form	lotto	shape	abacus	cray	brick	beak	ball	book
Child 1	0	+9	0		0		0	0			+18	+15
Child 2	+6	+12					0	0				
Child 3	-18						0	0				
Child 4	0	+9	0	0			0		0			
Child 5	+6	0		0	+12		+15	-3		0		

Positive numbers indicate parent's rating was higher than on Let's Play

Negative numbers indicate parent's rating was lower than on Let's Play

0 indicates exact agreement between the two scores

Of the 28 pairs of scores, 15 agreed perfectly (54%), 11 had a higher rating by parents (39%) and 2 had a lower rating by parents (7%). The degree of difference ranged from 18 months lower to 18 months higher. The correlation between the two measures was significant ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$ level). This association is illustrated graphically in Figure 2.3.

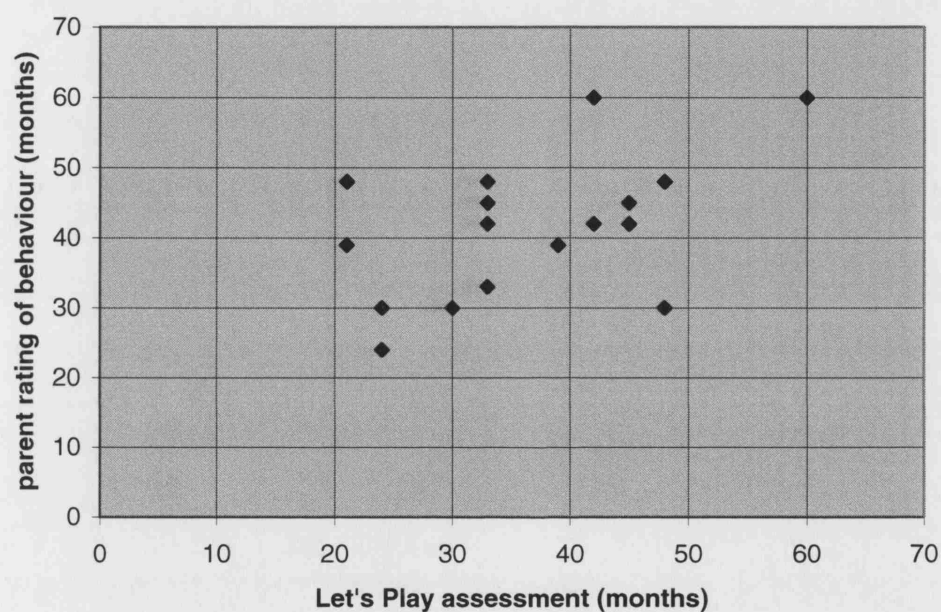


Figure 2.3. Concurrent validity association (parents' ratings)

Comparison with skills shown at pre-school

Only one questionnaire was returned from the children's pre-schools (child 4). This child played with 6 toys and the pre-school completed ratings for 5 of these. For these toys 2 agreed exactly, 2 were rated 3 months lower by the pre-school and 1 was rated 3 months higher by the pre-school.

Comparison with performance on Symbolic Play Test

The SPT was administered during the second home visit and therefore the time delay from the first Let's Play session was the same as for the inter-rater measure. As a result, this measure is subject to the same difficulties with timing as described in the inter-rater results, i.e. long time intervals between some measures. The children's performances on the SPT and the two symbolic elements of Let's Play (large toys and miniatures) were compared (see Table 2.5.).

Table 2.5. Summary of scores on Symbolic Play Test and the symbolic elements of Let's Play (developmental levels, in months)

	Symbolic Play Test	Average of large toys and miniatures
Child 1	29.8	31.5
Child 2	29.8	28.5
Child 3	0	48
Child 4	0	28.5
Child 5	36	28.5

It was not appropriate to calculate a correlation coefficient, as there were only five data points. However, the table shows that for three of the children there was close agreement between their scores on the two tests. The remaining two children failed to score on the SPT, despite achieving relatively good scores on Let's Play.

2.4. Discussion: review of the pilot study in terms of the aims set

2.4.1. Aim 1: *To assess the usefulness of the evaluation framework*

The suitability of Let's Play

The play assessment session appeared to be enjoyable and accessible, so in this respect it seems to be a suitable assessment tool for the study. It appeared to be a sufficiently flexible assessment tool to use with children with a range of difficulties and would therefore allow the inclusion of a diverse range of children in the main study. Let's Play also seemed to be positively received by parents – an important factor in maintaining their participation in the study and in ensuring that it was a positive experience for them. Let's Play provides developmental scales ranging between 18 months and 5 years. The children in the pilot study had an average age of 4 years, 1 month and tended to score at the upper ends of the scales. There was therefore a danger of ceiling effects and this could have contributed to misleadingly high levels of agreement. This difficulty could easily be overcome by including younger children in the main study.

The suitability of the test evaluation framework

The four measures chosen seemed to yield a surprisingly rich amount of information on validity and reliability and therefore give a good picture of some of the technical aspects of test evaluation. However, the overall evaluation of Let's Play is significantly limited by the lack of what Anastasi (1990) calls 'practical evaluation' data. Factors such as face validity have been identified as being important for tools used by psychologists, and have predominated evaluations of UK play-based assessment tools (e.g. Sayeed & Guerin, 2000). There are also concerns that notions such as reliability, although important, may have limited application to an informal,

spontaneous play situation (Mogford-Bevan, 2002). It may therefore be appropriate to include at least one of Anastasi's practical evaluation criteria in the main study.

It was also difficult to interpret some of the pilot study data without reference to more qualitative and contextual information (e.g. Why did certain children perform so differently on the second assessment session? Why did some children perform consistently and others not?). In the main study it will be important to include qualitative, contextual background information in order to inform the quantitative findings.

2.4.2. Aim 2: To trial the evaluation measures

Measures for criterion 1: Test-retest reliability:

The time interval between the assessments for some children was probably too long for a true test-retest measure (Anastasi, 1990). However, interestingly the longest interval (42 days) resulted in a perfect test-retest agreement, so it may not be necessary to reduce the time interval too significantly in the main study. A second methodological finding was that there was a danger of results on the second session being influenced by the researcher's expectations from the first session, particularly if the researcher consulted records or videos between the two visits. Controls would be needed in the main study to manage this source of bias, in particular not permitting revisiting of previous ratings or videos before carrying out the second session.

Measures for criterion 2: Inter-rater reliability:

On a positive note, the videos were very clear and the child's behaviour and interaction with the researcher could be clearly seen and heard. However, no inter-rater data was obtained due to pressure of time for the researcher and the EP raters. There is a need to significantly review the methodology for this criterion to make data collection easier to organise and to increase EP compliance.

Measures for criterion 3: Concurrent validity:

As with the test-retest criterion, the time interval between the first Let's Play session and the concurrent measures was sometimes long, and there was a danger that the measures may not have been truly concurrent. As described previously, this interval would need to be reduced in the main study. There were also some difficulties with the concurrent data itself. In particular, the lack of data from the pre-schools (a 25% return rate) was a major problem. This may reflect a fairly usual return rate for a postal questionnaire, but is not suitable for the main study because so few children are involved. Visiting the pre-schools and conducting the part of the study as a structured interview may be a more effective method of data collection for the main study. In relation to the Symbolic Play Test, the data was also limited because two of the children did not want to play with the toys. In the researcher's view, this was because many of the children were reluctant to stop playing with the Let's Play toys and move onto this test. It may therefore be more appropriate to conduct the two assessments on separate home visits.

Measures for criterion 4: construct validity

No additional data collection was required for this criterion.

The overall manageability of data collection methods

In organisational terms, it was difficult to collect the data for all the children simultaneously and to keep it within time scales. With greater numbers of children in the main study this potentially presented even more challenges, and more time would need to be allocated to the data collection process. More specifically, the second home visit often seemed very rushed. During this visit two assessments were carried out and feedback on the whole assessment process was given to the parents. For the main study it would be preferable to spread the assessments over three visits to ensure that there is sufficient time for feedback. Data collection in the first visit was greatly facilitated by making this a joint visit with a Pre-school Teacher in that it provided a good way to introduce educational psychology involvement and was extremely helpful in the videoing of the session. However, parents required more information on the study before this first visit, and it would be helpful to produce an information leaflet for them, so that they could read about the study before the first visit.

Suitability of data analysis techniques

The pilot study revealed that, as might be expected, not all the children played with all the toys. This is a feature of Let's Play, as it is designed to be a flexible and child-led tool. However, for the purposes of the main study it means that some children may have only a few pairs of scores and this may constrain the type of data analysis that will be possible. In addition, the process of transforming the data into ages and treating this as ratio data needs to be viewed with caution. Firstly, the transformations from the broad age bands in Let's Play are not exact and many of the resulting age levels are approximations. Secondly, the resulting scale is not a true

interval scale, as the age levels can only increase in 3-month steps. This means that the data analysis techniques may violate statistical principles and care will need to be taken to ensure that techniques used in the main study are more appropriate for the ordered categories of behaviour used in Let's Play. Using a correlation coefficient for the data may also be misleading in that it may give an artificially high picture of the correlation. This is because some of the toys have narrower or lower age ranges than others and therefore their levels are not as free to vary as for other toys (e.g. the range for nesting beakers is 27 to 45 months, whereas for the bricks it is 15 to 63). This suggests that agreement rather than correlation is a more appropriate way to analyse the data in the main study.

2.4.3. Aim 3: To gain an initial impression of the reliability and validity of Let's Play

Criterion 1: test-retest reliability

The overall test-retest agreement appeared reasonable, in that there was a statistically significant correlation. However, only 50% of the scores on the two occasions agree and there were some toys where the scores on each occasion were very different.

There are also strong indications of differences between children, with some achieving perfect agreement between the sessions and others obtaining very different scores. These findings will require further investigation in the main study.

Criterion 2: inter-rater reliability

There were no findings from this criterion, due to the methodological difficulties outlined above.

Criterion 3: concurrent validity

Concurrent agreement for the parents' ratings appeared reasonable, as there was a statistically significant correlation. However, there are significant concerns regarding the validity of the parents' ratings. The parents have watched the Let's Play session and this will have impacted on their view of their child's behaviour with these toys. Their ratings may therefore not be a good measure of the children's usual play at home. In relation to the one pre-school who responded, there are indications that agreement in relation to this criterion may be good (all variations were within \pm 3 months), although it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from only one child. For the Symbolic Play Test, there appeared to be a degree of concurrent agreement but it is clearly important to encourage more children to engage with this test in the main study, so that measures could possibly be obtained for those children who do not find it as appealing.

Criterion 4: construct validity

It is difficult to draw many conclusions about this criterion because relatively little data was collected in the pilot study. However, if more data could be collected for each of the criteria, this would provide a rich source of information about the nature of children's play in Let's Play. The children did seem to enjoy the Let's Play assessment and it certainly had the feel of play, in that it was flexible and open-ended and the children seemed happy and involved.

2.5. Summary

Aim 1

The pilot study indicated that the evaluation framework provided a suitable basis for evaluating the usefulness of play-based assessment. Let's Play was accessible and the test evaluation framework gave a good range of information. However, the quantitative data did not provide a full picture and would need to be supplemented by qualitative data.

Aim 2

The evaluation measures generally worked well but some changes would be needed to make them more pertinent to the research questions and to make data collection more manageable.

Aim 3

Initial impressions were that there were some complex issues relating to the validity and reliability of play-based assessment. An initial hypothesis is that, although the overall reliability and validity were relatively good in terms of correlation, there might be considerable variation between individuals and possibly between toys.

CHAPTER 3

MAIN STUDY - METHOD

3.1. Rationale for the design of the main study

The main study had essentially the same design as the pilot but with the changes to the criterion measures, methodology and data analysis outlined in the previous chapter.

The main study added a fifth evaluation criterion based on Anastasi's practical evaluation criterion of face validity/taker rapport. As discussed in the previous chapter, this criterion was chosen because of its importance in psychological assessment, its prevalence in previous evaluations and the claims about accessibility of play-based assessment tools (e.g. Linder, 1990; Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001; Waters, 1999). As discussed in the literature review, Cohen (1993) has also criticised research on children's play for treating play as a 'desiccated skill', removed from the social and emotional contexts in which it occurs. The inclusion of more qualitative and contextual information would allow consideration of the richness and complexity of individual children's responses to the assessment situation and would enhance the information collected through the technical evaluation criteria.

The main study also incorporated a range of changes to methods of data collection, and also more sophisticated data analysis in order to explore some of the complexities and subtleties of the information gathered. This included more detailed analysis of the data at the level of individual children and individual toys and also

added illustrative examples of individual children's assessments. These examples were not intended to reveal findings that could be generalised – rather, it was hoped that they would provide information on the richness of the assessment context for individual children.

3.1.1. *The research questions revisited*

As outlined in chapter 1, the theoretical questions underpinning the main research question remained extremely important. The more detailed questions for each of the four technical criteria remained unchanged in the main study but were supplemented by questions for the new criterion:

Questions related to face validity/taker rapport:

- Is Let's Play accessible – particularly for those children who might be considered difficult to assess?
- Do children seem to find it interesting and enjoyable?
- Do parents experience the assessment in a positive way?
- Is Let's Play easy and enjoyable to use for the assessor?
- What implications do the findings have for the use of Let's Play and for play-based assessment generally in terms of providing an enjoyable, accessible and meaningful assessment context?

The overall framework of the study was adapted to take account of the changes outlined above. The new framework could now be described as having a mixed design, where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The appropriateness of such approaches is described by Boulton and Hammersley (1996), who note:

...we do not think it is helpful to see qualitative and quantitative research as based on clearly distinct and incompatible paradigms...which should be used depends in large part on the goal of the research, and the circumstances in which these are to be pursued; and often the two sorts of data may need to be combined. (p.283)

The revised framework is shown in Figure 3.1.

3.2. Participants

Twelve pre-school children took part in the study. The aim was to obtain a sample of children who would be representative of the children EPs work with in the early years. However, in the main study the researcher was not the link EP for all the children, as had been the case in the pilot, and a request was made to other EPs in the local team to identify families to take part. As in the pilot, the criteria for inclusion in the study were that there should already have been a request for EP involvement and that parents should have agreed to this by signing the service's consent form. These criteria were made clear to the EPs and it was also stressed that there were no other restrictions on involvement in the study (so as to reduce any selection bias). As part of their normal contact with parents, EPs then invited parents to take part. All the families put forward by EPs agreed to take part in the study and selection was on a simple first come basis until a total of 12 children had been reached (once again, to avoid selection bias).

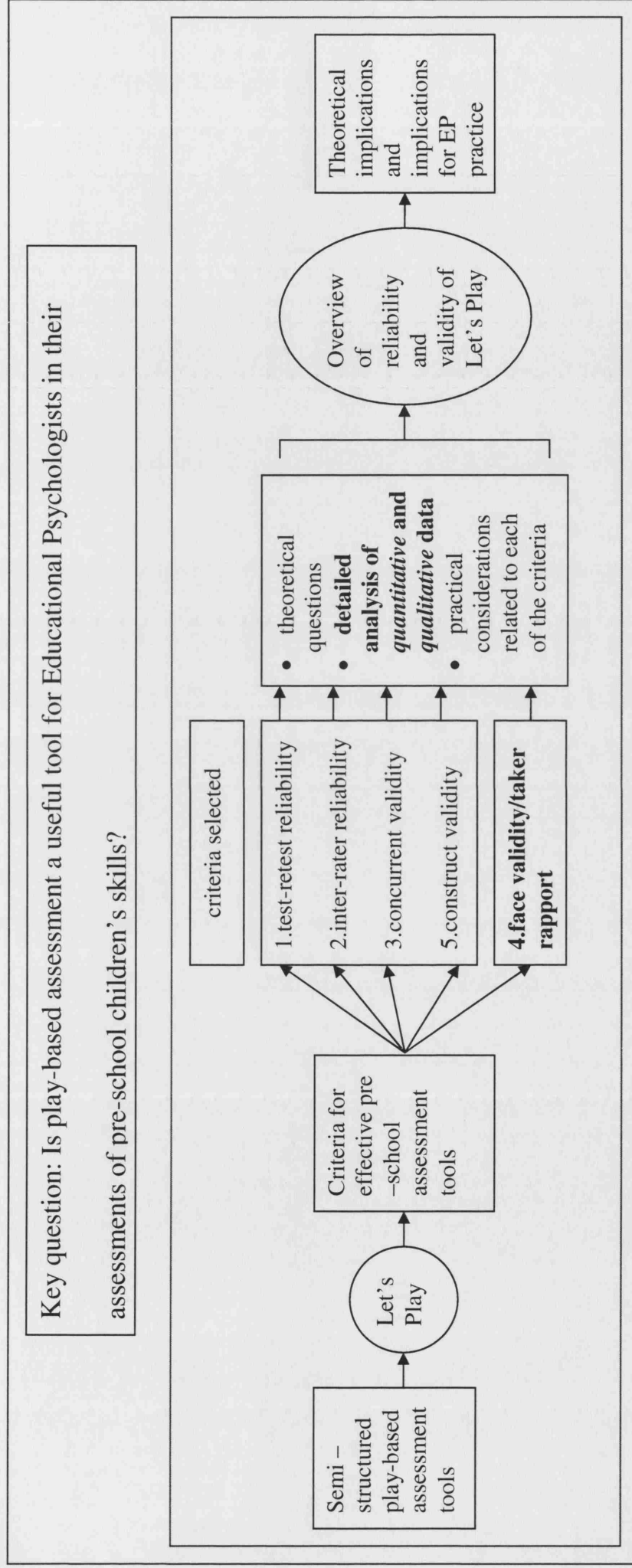


Figure 3.1. Revised framework for the main study (changes from the pilot study are shown in bold)

The participants were drawn from a large geographical area covering the southern part of a shire county. This area comprised of a mixture of areas including villages, towns and army accommodation. All the children in the study were of white/Caucasian backgrounds and in this respect the sample differed significantly from several of the published evaluations. For example, the sample in the study by Farmer-Dougan and Kaszuba (1999) was made up of 19% 'Afro-American' children with the remainder 'white', and the sample in the study by Myers *et al.* (1996) contained 5% 'Asian-American' children, 25% 'African-American' and the remainder 'white'.

There were 10 boys and 2 girls in the study. This reflects the proportions in the evaluation studies that have also used samples of children with SEN (e.g. Myers *et al.*, 1996; Smith *et al.*, 1996). The sample represented a fairly even spread across pre-school ages, and included several younger children than those in the pilot study. The average age of the children was 3 years 5 months; the range was 2 years 0 months to 4 years 9 months. The children's ages were evenly distributed across the age range.

The participants covered a range of Special Educational needs and provision, which are detailed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Special Educational Needs and likely future provision for children in the study

Child	Main area of SEN	Code Of Practice stage	Likely future provision (View of link EP/parents)
1	Medical: tubular sclerosis	EYAP –statutory assessment being requested	Nursery in Local school
2	Learning	EYAP –statutory assessment being requested	Special school nursery
3	Language	EYAP	Local school
4	Learning /medical	Statutory assessment underway	Special school nursery
5	Social and communication	EYAP –statutory assessment being requested	Local school
6	Language/social and communication	EYAP	Local school
7	Social and communication	EYAP	Local school
8	Behaviour	EYAP	Local school
9	Visual impairment	EYAP –statutory assessment being requested	Special school nursery
10	Learning/emotional and behavioural	EYAP –statutory assessment being requested	Local school
11	Autistic spectrum disorder	EYAP –statutory assessment being requested	Special school nursery
12	Learning	EYAP –statutory assessment being requested	Special school nursery

Clearly, it is not possible to cover the whole array of needs in such a small sample, but the table shows there is a range, including some lower incidence difficulties (e.g. a child with tubular sclerosis and a child registered as blind). There is also a range of degree of difficulty, from children who were likely to remain at Early Years Action Plus to children with more severe and generalised developmental difficulties. This distribution of SEN is in line with the range of mild to moderate needs outlined in several studies (e.g. Malone *et al.*, 1994) and with samples that have included children referred to services because of their SENs (e.g. Smith *et al.*, 1996; Myers *et al.*, 1996).

3.3. Ethical considerations

Some changes were made to the pilot study procedures in order to strengthen the ethical standpoint. Once again, all parents had agreed to EP involvement and had signed the necessary consent form. However, in the main study parents were also given a short leaflet explaining the study at the outset (see Appendix 12). The aim of this change was to ensure that parents fully understood the nature of the study and the implications of their agreement (or non-agreement) *before* agreeing to take part, as recommended by the BPS guidelines (BPS, 2000). The leaflet was written in a question and answer format, so as to be as clear as possible. A second change to the selection process was that once this leaflet had been given to parents it was left to the parents themselves to contact their EP if they were interested in taking part. This helped to ensure that no pressure was placed on parents and that they were truly opting into the study. This strengthened the study's stance in relation to the BPS guidelines on ensuring pressure was not exerted to take part, and aimed to minimise the power differential between researcher and participant (Fox & Rendall, 2002). All the parents approached did then contact their EP to say they would like to take part.

As with the pilot study, time was taken to provide an introduction to the study during the first visit. However, in the main study this followed a discussion protocol, rather than being more informal and unstructured (see Appendix 13 for the protocol). The parents were also given a letter outlining their rights as participants. Essentially, this letter took the same format as in the pilot but with modifications to accommodate the fact that the researcher was not the link EP for all the children (see Appendix 14). The link EP was always present at this initial home visit, and hopefully this helped parents feel at ease and also allowed the link EP to ask any questions.

As in the pilot, the study was conducted in partnership with parents in that they were present and invited to comment during all the assessments. However, the inclusion of qualitative feedback from parents in the main study meant that their views were given increased prominence and status, once again helping to redress the power imbalance with the researcher. As with the pilot, verbal feedback was given to parents at the end of the final home visit and a Record of Involvement was also written for each child and sent to parents and the link EP.

The ethical considerations relating to the involvement of pre-school staff differed significantly from those in the pilot study as they were revised to cover the same ethical considerations as for the parents. Rather than simply sending a letter, the researcher telephoned pre-schools to explain the study and invite them to take part (making clear that parents had agreed to this and that there was no pressure to take part). On visiting the pre-schools the researcher also gave them a copy of the leaflet outlining the study (see Appendix 12) and also a letter thanking them for taking part and detailing how the outcomes of the interview would be used and shared (see Appendix 15). All the pre-schools contacted willingly agreed to take part.

At the end of the study all participants were sent a brief summary of the overall study findings. This was felt to be important, given the BPS guidelines on providing feedback to participants, and the nature of the relationship built up between parents and researcher during the course of the assessments. This wider feedback ensured that parents had feedback on both their child's performance and the findings of the study and aimed to overcome the dangers of parents feeling let down or 'used' when the research ended (Fox & Rendall, 2002).

3.4. Data Collection

The data collection timetable was revised so that it took place over three home visits and included a visit to the child's pre-school, which it was hoped would be more effective in gathering the pre-school data than the postal questionnaire used in the pilot. The data collection timetable also included the qualitative data collection tasks (discussed in detail later in this chapter). Once again, activity sheets were used, so that the data collection timetable could be tracked for each child (see Table 3.2.).

3.4.1. Using *Let's Play*

As in the pilot study, the standard set of toys in *Let's Play* was used and the protocols laid down in the Guide 1 were followed. Due to the availability of toys, it was not possible to include the bricks or picture lotto but this was acceptable given that Waters (1999) states that assessors do not have to adhere to the list of toys she includes. For the qualitative data included in the main study, the list of behaviours included in Guide 2 (Part 1) was used as a basis for the informal observations. All the assessments were carried out at home, except for child 12 where it was carried out at pre-school, as this was more convenient for parents. This does not depart from the *Let's Play* guidelines, which state that assessment can take place at home, pre-school or assessment centres. The *Let's Play* record sheets were used in the same way as in the pilot.

Table 3.2. Data collection schedule – main study

	<u>Home visit1</u> (With PSTC/EP)	<u>Home visit 2</u> (Alone)	<u>Intervening period</u> (max. three weeks)	<u>Home visit 3</u> (Alone)	<u>Follow up activities</u>
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain study and EP role to parents Give parents consent letter and outline Invite Qs from parents 				
Test-retest reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carry out play-based assessment (PSTC/EP videos) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carry out second play-based assessment 			
Construct validity				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administer Symbolic Play Test 	
Criterion validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gain parental consent to contact pre-school group. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visit pre-school group and complete schedule. 		
Inter-rater reliability					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EP 1 watches video of assessment and rates child on record form. EP 2 watches video of assessment and rates child on record form.
Qualitative data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete Interactive Factors Framework (IFF) sheet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update IFF sheet 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update IFF sheet Parent's comments 	
General				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide verbal feedback to parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brief Record of Involvement sent to parents

3.5. Method for each of the evaluation criteria

The overall framework for the collection of data in relation to the four technical measures was essentially the same as in the pilot. The key difference, however, was the inclusion of contextual information and the methodology for this data will be discussed before moving on to consider the four original criteria and new qualitative criterion in detail.

3.5.1. *Contextual information*

It was decided that contextual information should be collected in as many areas as possible in order to build up a full picture for each child. For example, information was needed on the context of the assessment session, key factors relating to the child's strengths and needs, issues relating to the pre-school, or wider factors relating to the family situation. A framework was needed to organise this information and the Interactive Factors Framework was chosen for this purpose. Frederickson and Cline (2002) outline the Interactive Factors Framework (IFF) and describe how the model is based on the work of Morton and Frith (1995) who developed a simple visual aid to help people communicate about complex developmental problems. Frederickson and Cline describe how this framework has been adapted to provide descriptions of individual children's strengths and difficulties at the biological, cognitive, behavioural and environmental levels, and use an adaptation of the model by Frederickson and Cameron (1999) for this purpose. This adaptation of the model was used to organise the contextual information in the study (see Appendix 16).

Each child had a separate IFF record sheet and this was used to record any salient points about the child's performance or situation after each visit. Factors related to the child's approach to the assessment situation were structured using the list of possible learner behaviours from Let's Play Guide 2 (part 1) and then recorded on the IFF sheet. As this type of qualitative information is very subjective and reflects the researcher's individual perspective on the contextual factors, it was used only to illustrate the more objective and quantitative information.

3.5.2. Changes to the methodology for individual criteria

Criterion 1: test –retest reliability

This criterion followed the same format as in the pilot, with the difference that the time interval between the two sessions was reduced to three weeks in order to avoid the problems of children maturing and developing between assessments. In addition, in order to ensure that the researcher's expectancy in the second session was not influenced, the researcher did not refer to any information about the child between the two sessions. This also meant that the pre-school visit was not made between these two assessment visits. In relation to the contextual information, the IFF sheet was completed after each of the two assessments. Particular attention was paid to any factors that might be influencing the child on that particular day.

Criterion 2: inter-rater reliability

The process of videoing the first assessment session and the model for comparing ratings across the researcher and two EPs remained unchanged from the pilot.

However, other changes were needed in order to overcome the difficulties

experienced in the pilot in recruiting EPs to watch and rate the videos. To inform these changes, the psychological literature was consulted. Baron and Byrne (1981) provide a useful overview of the relevant literature and note that it contains two main theoretical explanations for helping behaviour. The first is a reinforcement model, whereby people will help because of their experience of being rewarded for the behaviour or their expectation of future rewards (material, verbal, social reinforcement). Altruistic behaviour is higher when rewards are maximised and costs (time, danger etc) are minimised. The second theoretical explanation examines the decision making process a person goes through in deciding to help. Of particular relevance to this study are indications that people are much more likely to help if they state their intention to do so and if they have already been exposed to the situation or have taken some previous action. This research informed several changes to the methodology for this criterion, as outlined below:

- minimising costs to EPs by emphasising the short time needed and making the videos available to watch in the convenience of the office;
- maximising rewards by providing plenty of positive verbal feedback, stressing that this was a useful CPD activity, and stressing how helpful their assistance was;
- using social reinforcers, such as lots of positive 'chat' about the study, to create a feeling of group involvement amongst the EP team;
- encouraging EPs to state their intention to help. The study was outlined at a team meeting and then an email was sent to all EPs asking for volunteers; and
- building on the fact that EPs had already taken part in the study when they had identified families and carried out filming. The email thanked EPs for their help so far and alerted them to the next stage where they could help.

Any EP who offered to help was given a randomly selected video to watch and score, along with the instruction letter used in the pilot study (see Appendix 6).

In relation to the contextual and qualitative information for this criterion, the relevant information was contained within the IFF sheet completed by the researcher after the first Let's Play session.

Criterion 3: concurrent validity

The method for this criterion differed significantly to that of the pilot, in that parent ratings were no longer used and pre-schools were visited rather than being sent questionnaires. The pre-school concurrent measure therefore consisted of a visit to the pre-school to meet with a key-worker for the child, or any other adults who knew the child well in the setting. Visits were made at a time to suit the pre-school staff, either during a session or at breaktimes. The meeting itself began with an initial introduction where the background to the study and the instructions in the letter were explained. Staff were instructed to complete only the behaviours they had actually seen the child do – although these could be at any time in the past and in any situation in pre-school. The researcher then went through the record sheets for each toy and asked pre-school staff to comment on whether they had seen the various descriptions of behaviour. In completing the record sheet, time was taken to ensure that staff were familiar with the toy being discussed and the toy itself was produced if clarification was needed. As in the pilot study, the Symbolic Play Test was also used as a measure of concurrent validity. However, the method was slightly different to the pilot because the SPT was administered separately during the newly

introduced third home visit in order to ensure that the child was 'fresh' and motivated to engage.

In relation the qualitative data collection for this criterion, as well as the information on the IFF sheets further comments were added in relation to any general points made by pre-school staff and any important aspects of the child's approach to the Symbolic Play Test.

Criterion 4: face validity/taker rapport

This criterion was introduced in the main study and therefore new aspects of the methodology needed to be developed. Clearly, there are two separate dimensions to this criterion, and the data collection methods for each will be outlined briefly before turning to some of the considerations relating to the methodology for both. For both measures, it was decided to focus on the children and their parents, as key 'consumers' of the assessment process. The information gathered is outlined below.

Face validity:

- parents' views on the advantages and disadvantages of play-based assessment.

Test-taker rapport:

- the researcher's view on the child's approach to the assessment situations;
- the parents' views on the child's approach to Let's Play, from their perspective; and
- the parents' views on their own experiences of the assessment sessions (i.e. how they felt when watching the sessions). Although parents were not strictly test-takers, they were experiencing and, in many ways, undergoing the assessment.

This information was gathered using Let's Play Guide 2 (already discussed) and a semi-structured interview. The data collection methods are outlined in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3. Summary of data collection methods for face validity/taker rapport

Aspect of the criterion	Sources of information	Data collection method
Face validity	Parent's views of pros and cons of the play-based assessment	Semi- structured interview
Test-taker rapport	Assessor's views on the children's approach	Let's Play Guide 2, recorded on IFF sheet
	Parent's views on the children's approach	Semi- structured interview
	Parent's own experiences of the play-based session	Semi- structured interview

The semi-structured interview:

Semi-structured interviews fall somewhere between naturalistic conversations and formal interviews. Wilson (1996) outlines the advantages of this approach in relation to allowing the researcher to survey the whole of an area before deciding on categories and helping the respondent to feel that all their views are being considered and recorded. Drever (1995) notes that the semi-structured interview is well suited to small-scale research studies where there is a need to gain an in-depth view of people's perceptions. For these reasons a semi-structured interview was selected for the current study. It was decided that the researcher would conduct the interview at the end of the third assessment visit – just before feedback was given to parents. As the interview was part of the wider study, gaining permission to interview and

negotiating the ‘research bargain’ with parents had already been carried out. The interview strengthened the involvement of parents as active participants in the research and gave status to their views.

Drever (1995) outlines some of the key issues in designing a semi-structured interview, and these points were used in drawing up the schedule for the study. The starting point for design is the research questions, with interview questions structured into a logical order, usually starting with a more general question and ending with a sweeper question to pick up on anything else the interviewee wishes to say. The interview schedule for the study was designed along these principles and contained six open-ended questions, as outlined in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4. Outline of structured interview with parents

Question	Evaluation Area	Description
1	N/A	General introductory question.
2	Test-taker rapport	Parents’ views about the child’s approach to Let’s Play.
3	Test-taker rapport	Parents’ views on their own feelings during Let’s Play.
4	Face validity	Parents’ perceptions of the advantages of play-based assessment.
5	Face validity	Parents’ perceptions of the disadvantages of play-based assessment.
6	N/A	Sweeper question for any other comments parents wished to make.

The result was a very short structured interview, designed to be as naturalistic as possible but with a degree of structure in order to maintain some consistency of approach and a focus around the research questions (see Appendix 17 for the full interview schedule). The researcher recorded parents' responses in the form of brief notes – which would form the basis of later analysis.

In designing this part of the data collection it was important to address possible threats to the reliability and validity of the data collected. Cresswell (1994) stresses the importance of addressing such issues in qualitative research and outlines three key areas to be considered – each of which will be examined with reference to the study.

1. Internal validity (the accuracy of the information in relation to reality):

In the study, the interview context was familiar to parents and, as this was the third visit, it was hoped that a degree of rapport and trust had been built with the researcher. The structure of the interview also aimed to ensure a natural interview where interviewees could express a wide range of views. There was, however, a danger of biases arising from the fact that parents were giving responses to an interviewer who they already knew quite well. In order to minimise these no indication of researcher's views was given and it was made very clear that it was the parents' views that were wanted. Another area that was crucial in maintaining internal validity was the use of field notes for recording responses. These were felt to be the most appropriate and manageable form of data collection but care needed to be taken to ensure that systematic biases were not introduced in recording the responses. As Wilson (1996) recommends, only words actually used by the

interviewees were recorded and it was decided that there should be no filling out of the notes after the interview (i.e. only the words actually recorded in the notes were used for analysis). With respect to information on the child's approach to Let's Play, a form of triangulation was possible in order to check the validity of the parents' comments, as the researcher had also recorded comments on the child's approach during the assessment.

2. External validity (the limitations of generalisability of the findings):

The interviews looked at a unique set of views from a small sample of parents.

These parents were typical of the target population (parents of children for whom EP involvement had been requested) but the small sample size in the study seriously limits how the findings can be generalised.

3. Reliability (limitations in replicating the study):

The design of this study meant that each interview was a unique reflection of the interaction between the parent and the researcher and of a parent's reaction to the interview situation. Significantly, as the researcher was conducting the interviews, there was undoubtedly potential for biases from the researcher's personal point of view, despite the measures taken to maintain validity.

Criterion 5: construct validity

The changes introduced following the pilot study meant that a slightly different range of information was used to determine construct validity, with information on face validity and the child's approach to the assessment situation being added to the information obtained from the other measures.

3.6. Data analysis techniques

One of the key findings from the pilot was that the quantitative data needed to be reconceptualised and analysed in a more appropriate way. The overall shift in the main study was towards a much more conservative and rigorous analysis of the data – to avoid reaching conclusions based on inappropriate transformations of the data. These changes are outlined below.

Focusing on actual behaviour rather than developmental ages

The key focus for the comparisons was now whether the child behaved in the same way in the various assessment situations, so as to avoid the problems of transforming behaviours into developmental ages.

Treating the Let's Play scales as ordered categories of behaviour

Waters (1999) notes that the behavioural descriptions for each toy are ordered developmentally and it was therefore decided that the behaviours recorded could be treated as ordered categories and analysed using techniques for ordinal data. Each behavioural description was allocated a number according to its place in the developmental sequence for the specific toy (Table 3.5. gives examples for two toys). As can be seen, the age interval between categories differs but this not a problem if they are considered as ordered categories. A child's rating on a particular toy is the highest ordered category shown.

Table 3.5. Examples of allocated categories for two toys

SIX PIECE FORM BOARD

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Age Norm</i>	<i>✓ or X</i>	<i>Rank ordered category allocated</i>
Inserts circle correctly	18 m – 2 yrs		1
Inserts three shapes correctly	2 – 2.5 yrs		2
Inserts six shapes correctly (over one minute)	2.5- 3 yrs		3
Inserts six shapes correctly (in one minute)	3 yrs +		4
Names Shapes: square, triangle, circle	4 yrs		5

SYMBOLIC PLAY – Large toys (teddy, doll, tea pot, cups, spoons, plates, play food, telephone, pillow, blanket, bath, soap, toothbrush, sponge, brush etc.)

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Age Norm</i>	<i>✓ or X</i>	<i>Rank ordered category allocated</i>
Names teddy or other items (with some encouragement)	12 – 18 m		1
Applies toys to self (e.g. “sleeps” on pillow, brushes own hair)	13 – 15 m		2
Relates toys to each other briefly (e.g. stirs spoon in cup)	13 – 15 m		3
Indicates body part on teddy/doll when named	18 m – 2 yrs		4
Shows awareness of function of toys by relating them to each other (e.g. pours tea from pot)	18 m – 2 yrs		5
Applies toys to others e.g. offers tea to mum	2 yrs		6
Performs single actions of pretend play (e.g. feeds teddy, brushes hair of doll)	2 yrs		7
Performs a related sequence of actions (e.g. brushes doll’s teeth, then puts to bed)	2.5 yrs		8
Comments on what teddy/doll is going to do next	3 yrs		9
Completes a whole process (e.g. making tea from beginning to end)	4 yrs		10

Analysing data primarily for agreement

Essentially, for the purpose of the research questions, it is the degree of agreement between ratings, rather than correlation, that is important. In the main study, it was decided to follow the guidelines of Uebersax (2001-2003) and use the most simple, useful statistics to gauge rater agreement. Simple measures of agreement (e.g.

agreement coefficients) may overestimate the degree of agreement because they fail to take into account the agreements that would have occurred by chance. However, Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960) is a test of agreement for categorical data that gives a measure of 'the proportion of agreement after chance agreement is removed from the consideration' (Cohen, 1960, p.40). It is specifically designed for agreement between raters and is widely used in studies involving rater agreement. Kappa gives a coefficient of agreement that ranges from 0-1, with 1 representing perfect agreement. There is much disagreement about the level of kappa needed to conclude that a measure has sufficient agreement. Uebbersax (1987) cautions against using kappa as a corrected measure of agreement but recommends it is used simply for verification that agreement exceeds a chance level. Hodges and Zeeman (1993) quote the following guideline levels developed by Landis and Koch, and these will be used for this study:

- kappa greater than .75 = excellent
- kappa between .59 and .75 = good
- kappa between .40 and .58 = fair
- kappa below .40 = poor

Using descriptive, age based analysis to supplement the above

Although the main study used behaviour categories to score children's performances on Let's Play, the developmental age levels were also important in relation to the real-life use of the tool by EPs (Waters, 1999). Developmental age levels were therefore used in the illustrative examples, which aimed to give a realistic and

detailed picture of the assessments for particular children, in the way that they would be used in EP practice. However, given the dangers of transforming the data in this way, this data would be used only for graphical profiles and descriptive analysis.

Analysing the qualitative data

Comments were taken directly from the IFF sheets to illustrate children's approaches but analysis of the interview data was more complex. Grounded theory was used to analyse the interview responses, as described by Boulton and Hammersley (1996). They note that this is a fairly flexible procedure that aims to categorise comments in order to identify themes in the responses, and it therefore appeared appropriate for the study. They also comment that with a small set of data, such as in the study, it can be difficult to identify more than a few key themes and therefore the number of themes used was kept relatively small.

3.7. Summary

The methodology for the main study was essentially the same as that for the pilot, but with the changes outlined above. The key changes related to the inclusion of the additional qualitative criterion of face validity/taker rapport, the incorporation of contextual/qualitative information about the assessments and finally, a new approach to the analysis of rater agreement. Other changes to data collection aimed to overcome practical difficulties in data collection revealed by the pilot.

CHAPTER 4

MAIN STUDY - RESULTS

In this chapter, the results of the main study will be considered in relation to each of the evaluation criteria in turn.

4.1. Criterion 1: test-retest reliability

The time between the two play-based assessment sessions varied from 2 to 22 days, with an average of time difference of 8 days. Ten of the 12 children had test-retest intervals of a week or less – the exceptions being child 1 (19 days) and child 3 (22 days) for both of whom it was difficult to arrange appointments during the summer holidays. For 11 of the children there was no involvement between the two assessments but for child 8 the pre-school visit took place the day before the second session, due to difficulties in finding a suitable time for preschool staff.

4.1.1. *Test-retest: overall analysis*

Table 4.1. outlines the pattern of agreement and disagreement for all children across all the toys played with. In total, there were 77 pairs of play observations across the children and 36 of these were in agreement (46.8%). Cohen's kappa for the overall data was 0.41 ('fair' agreement according to Landis and Koch's guidelines).

Table 4.1. Test-retest agreement summary table (all children and all toys)


	symb	min	lock	form	shape	abacus	crayon	beak	ball	book
Child 1	+1	+1		0			-1	+1		+7
Child 2						0		-1		0
Child 3	+3	+1		+1	0	0	0	-1		+1
Child 4	-2	-2	0			+1				+3
Child 5	+2	+1	0	0	0		0	-1		-7
Child 6	0	-2	0	+1		+2	0	+2		-2
Child 7	0	-4		+1		-3	0	0		
Child 8	+2	0	0			0	+2	-1	-1	
Child 9	0	0	+1	+1		0		0		
Child 10	+1	+1	0	0		0	-9	0		0
Child 11	0		0	0		0		-1		
Child 12	-1	-1	0	+1		0	+4	0		

Figures represent the size of the differences in terms of the number of behaviour categories in the Let's Play ordered scale

Positive numbers represent a higher behaviour category on second assessment session

Negative numbers represent a lower behaviour category on second assessment session

0 indicates exact agreement between the two scores

 = toy not played with

Of the categories that did not agree, 60 (78%) of ratings in second session were within one category level of the rating in first session. 24 (31% of all observations) were developmentally higher in the second session and 17 (22% of all observations) were lower on the second assessment. The range of disagreement between the two sessions varied from 9 categories lower to 7 categories higher on the same toy in the second session. The distribution of category differences is shown in Figure 4.1.

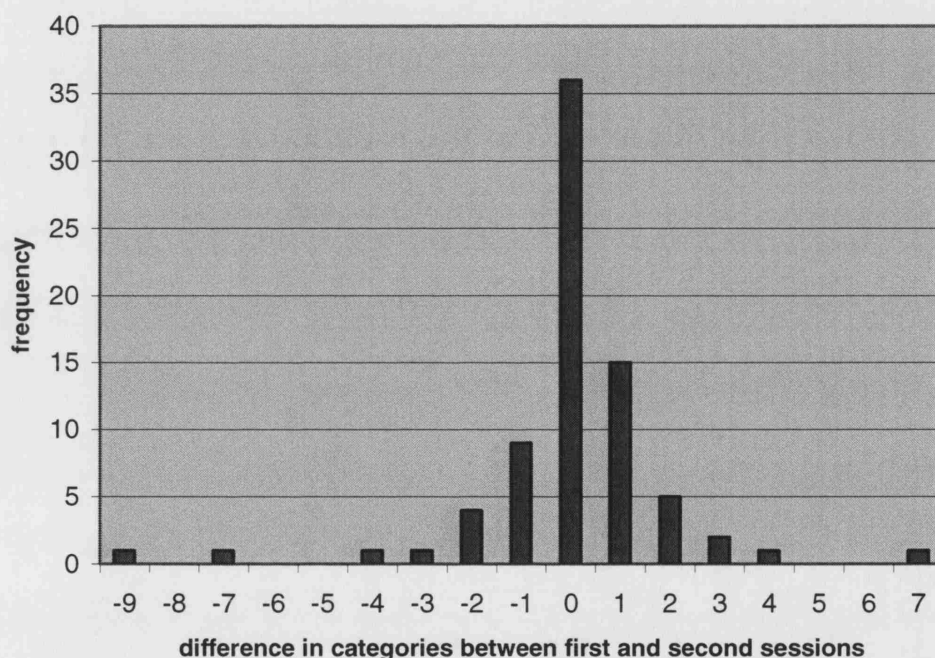


Figure 4.1. Distribution of test-retest differences (positive numbers represent a higher category on the second assessment).

Turning to the qualitative data recorded on the IFF sheets, the sheets were analysed for any comments that related to differences between sessions 1 and 2 (see Appendix 18 for full collated comments). For two of the children, the researcher had made a

note that they clearly remembered the toys from last time, e.g. knowing how many people should be in the play house. Several of the children had comments related to their different approach in the second session, in terms of being more settled (2 children), more interactive (6 children), more confident (1 child), more relaxed (1 child) and using more language (1 child). These comments seem to indicate improved interaction in the second session for 11 of the 12 children. There were no comments about interaction decreasing. The only comments relating to less positive performance on the second session were that two of the children played with the toys for a shorter amount of time and that one child was less interested in the toys.

4.1.2. *Test-retest: analysis by toy*

Ten different toys were used by the children across the two sessions. Some toys were more popular than others and some were only played with by only a few children. Table 4.2. summarises the patterns of play and test-retest agreement across the various toys. Cohen's kappa levels are given for toys where there were 10 or more pairs of observations.

As there are only a small number of pairs of observations for each toy, it is not appropriate to draw too many conclusions from these figures. However, levels of agreement do seem to vary between the toys, and can be summarised as follows:

- toys with the highest test-retest agreement: shapes, shape sorter, and abacus (all at or over 70% agreement);
- toys with the lowest test-retest agreement: miniatures, book, large toys, nesting beakers (all at or below 36%).

Table 4.2. Test-retest agreement across individual toys

Name of toy	Number of children choosing this toy (N=12)	Number of observations where categories agree	Number of observations with higher category in session 2	Number of observations with lower category in session 2	Cohen's Kappa
Large toys	11	4 (36%)	5 (45%)	2 (18%)	0.17 (poor)
Miniatures	10	2 (20%)	4 (40%)	4 (40%)	0.06 (poor)
Locking shape sorter	8	7 (88%)	1 (13%)	0	N/A
Form board	9	4 (44%)	5 (56%)	0	N/A
Shapes and sorting tray	2	2 (100%)	0	0	N/A
Abacus	10	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	0.59 (good)
Crayons, paper scissors	8	4	2	2	N/A
Nesting beakers	11	4 (36%)	2 (18%)	5 (45%)	0.16 (poor)
Ball	1	0	0	1 (100%)	N/A
Book	7	2 (29%)	3 (43%)	2 (29%)	N/A

The various toys also showed a range of differences in categories, although once again caution needs to be exercised in analysing these, as some toys were used by only a few children. These differences can be summarised as follows:

- toys with smallest range of categories between the two sessions: shape sorter, form board, shapes, nesting beakers (all within ± 2 ranks) - interestingly these are all visual/practical problem-solving toys;
- toys with largest range of difference between the two sessions: book, crayons/paper/scissors (both over or above ± 4 ranks).

4.1.3. Test-retest: analysis by child

Table 4.3. gives the test-retest agreement for individual children.

Table 4.3. Test–retest agreement across individual children

Child	Number of toys played with	Number of observations where categories agree	Number of observations with higher category in session 2	Number of observations with lower category in session 2
1	6	1(17%)	4 (67%)	1 (17%)
2	3	2 (67%)	0	1 (33%)
3	8	3 (38%)	4 (50%)	1 (13%)
4	5	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	2 (40%)
5	8	4 (50%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)
6	8	3 (38%)	3 (38%)	2 (25%)
7	6	3 (50%)	1 (17%)	2 (33%)
8	7	3 (43%)	2 (29%)	2 (29%)
9	6	4 (66%)	2 (33%)	0
10	8	5 (63%)	2 (25%)	1 (13%)
11	5	4 (80%)	0	1 (20%)
12	7	3 (43%)	2 (29%)	2 (29%)

Once again these are very small numbers, as individual children played with between only 3 and 8 toys. There are significant differences in the degree of agreement between the children:

- children with highest test-retest agreement: child 11 (80%), child 2 (67%), child 9 (66%) and child 10 (63%);
- children with the lowest test-retest agreement: child 1 (17%) and child 4 (20%).

There is no clearly discernable difference between these two groups of children.

The children with the highest agreements vary in age (2 years 0 months to 4 years 9 months) and type of SEN (autism, learning difficulties, visual impairment and learning/EBD) but they did all have a reasonably short test-retest time interval (7,7,5 and 3 days respectively). However, the children with the lowest levels of agreement did have some similarities. Both were aged 2, and both had significant and complex medical difficulties (tubular sclerosis and a metabolic condition) resulting in both learning and behaviour difficulties.

As discussed previously, on the IFF sheets 11 of the children had a comment relating to more positive social interaction and confidence in the second session. The exception was child 9 (visual impairment with no learning or behaviour difficulties) who showed the same extremely good interaction across both the sessions. No child showed a less enthusiastic or less engaged approach in the second session.

4.1.4. Illustrative examples

If the test-retest data for individual children is transformed into approximate developmental ages and combined with the qualitative data, an impression of the impact of test-retest variation for specific assessments can be gained.

Example A - child 11 (highest level of test-retest agreement)

This child was aged 3 years 1 month and had a diagnosis of autism. His profile of scores is shown in Figure 4.2.

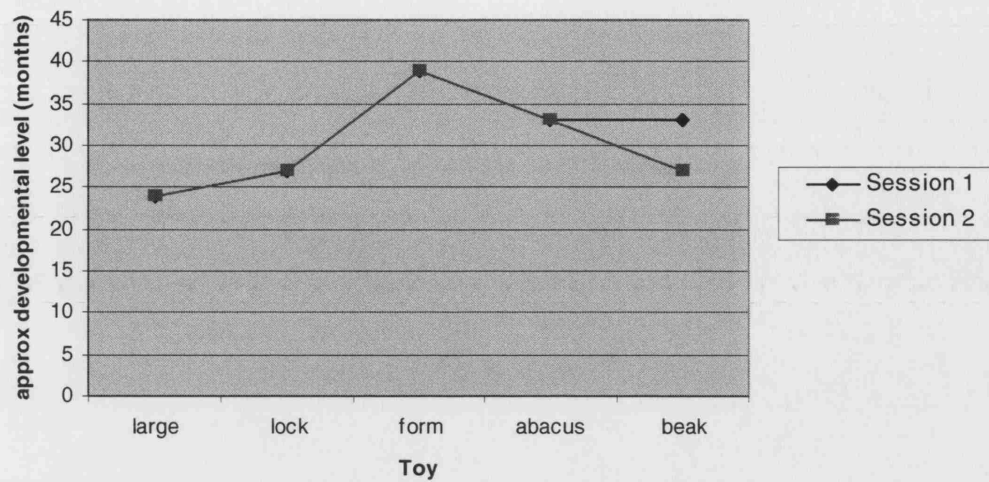


Figure 4.2. Test-retest reliability – child 11

For this child, there was perfect agreement in developmental ages across all toys except the nesting beakers, where he obtained a slightly lower age in the second session. Like many of the children, he showed a qualitatively different approach in the second session. During the first session he took no notice of the assessor or the toys but did settle to play. He showed good concentration in the play but minimal social interaction. He did not talk or make eye contact but did tolerate the assessor intervening in the play. In contrast, comments on the second session from the IFF sheet include ‘very different this time – aware of me – gives me eye contact when we meet’ and ‘has different favourites; shape sorter – loves; doesn’t want to do symbolic play’ and comments relating to shared focus and interaction. Therefore, despite the agreement in his developmental levels across the two sessions, he showed a very different approach. These differences were particularly important given that his main area of difficulty was social interaction.

Example B: child 1 (lowest level of test-retest agreement)

This child was aged 2 years 10 months and had a medical condition (tubular sclerosis) that had significant and variable impacts on learning and behaviour over time. For example, his language skills had regressed but were starting to come back at the time of the assessment and his parents reported a recent deterioration in behaviour as a result of new medication. His profile of skills is shown in Figure 4.3.

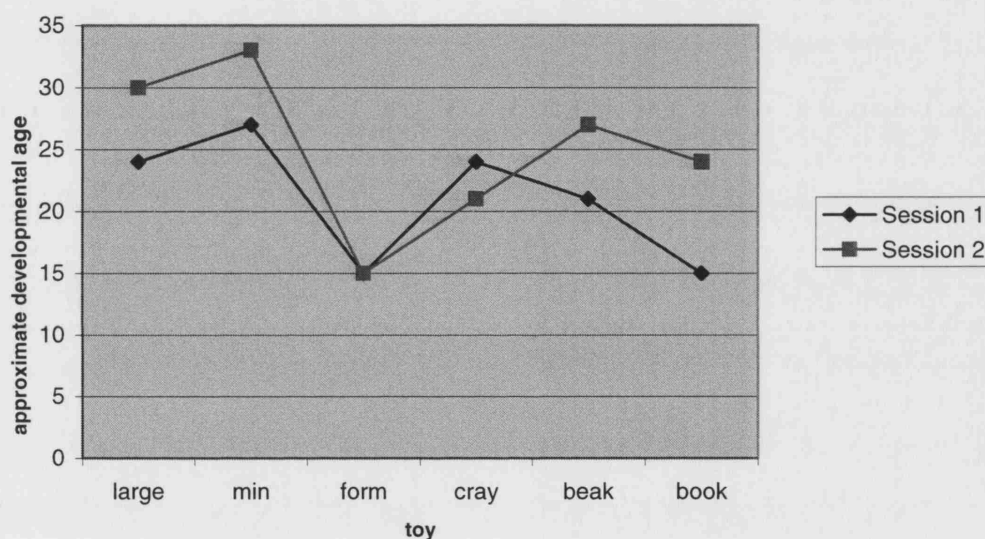


Figure 4.3. Test-retest reliability – child 1

There is little agreement in developmental ages across the two sessions, with the form board being the only toy where the age was the same in both the sessions. However, as can be seen from the graph, a similar profile of strengths and difficulties was obtained on both occasions, with generally higher levels in the second session. A comment from the IFF sheet for the second assessment mentions that he was 'much more settled today'.

4.2. Criterion 2: Inter-rater reliability

For each child, the video of session 1 was watched and scored by 2 EPs. In total, 9 EPs were involved in rating the videos, with the number of tapes watched by individual EPs varying from 1 to 5.

4.2.1. *Inter-rater: overall analysis*

The pattern of inter-rater agreement between the two EP raters watching the videos is shown in Table 4.4. In total there were 85 pairs of observations and 43 of these (51%) were in agreement. Cohen's kappa for the ratings between the two EPs was 0.51 ('fair' according to Landis and Koch's criteria). 72% of ratings between the two EPs were within one category of each other and the maximum range of disagreement was 10 categories.

The pattern of inter-rater agreement between the researcher and the two EPs is shown in Table 4.5. In total there were 170 pairs of observations and 91 of these (54%) were in agreement. Cohen's kappa for the ratings between the researcher and the two EPs was 0.52 ('fair'). 73% of ratings between the researcher and EPs were within one category of each other and the maximum range of disagreement was 7 categories. It is important to note that for several children the EP raters recorded behaviour on toys where the researcher had recorded none, i.e. the researcher had made no record that the child had engaged with the toy. This resulted in 7 additional play observations from the EPs (form board for child 8, ball for child 2, book for child 8 and shape sorter for children 4, 6, 9 and 10).

Table 4.4. Inter-rater agreement between EP raters (summary of all children and all toys)

	symp	min	lock	form	shape	abacus	cray	beak	ball	book
Child 1	0	+2		-1			-1	0		0
Child 2	+3					0		-1	+3	+2
Child 3	-1	-1		0	-2	0	0	-1		0
Child 4	0	0	-1		-2	0				0
Child 5	0	-2	-4	0	0		-5	0		-2
Child 6	-1	+2	0	0	0	0	0	0		0
Child 7	0	+2		0		0	+10	0		
Child 8	+3	+1	0	0		+2	+6	0	+1	+2
Child 9	0	+1	+2	+2	0	+1		0		
Child 10	+3	-1	-1	-2	-2	-5	0	+1		-2
Child 11	0		+1	0		-1		0		
Child 12	0	0	0	0		-1	0	0		

Figures represent the size of the differences in terms of the number of behaviour categories in the Let's Play ordered scale

Positive numbers represent a higher behaviour category rated by the second EP

Negative numbers represent a lower behaviour category rated by the second EP

0 indicates exact agreement between the two scores


 = toy not played with

Table 4.5. Inter-rater agreement between the researcher and EP raters (summary of all children and all toys)

		symb	min	lock	form	shape	abacus	cray	beak	ball	book
Child 1	EP1	0	-1		0			+1	+1		0
	EP2	0	+1		-1			0	+1		0
Child 2	EP1	0					0		0	0	-2
	EP2	+3					0		-1	+3	0
Child 3	EP1	+2	+2		0	0	-2	0	0		0
	EP2	+1	+1		0	-2	-2	0	-1		0
Child 4	EP1	0	0	+1		+2	0				0
	EP2	0	0	0		0	0				0
Child 5	EP1	+1	-2	-2	-1	-2		-7	0		0
	EP2	+1	0	-6	-1	-2		-2	0		-2
Child 6	EP1	+1	-2	-2	+1	0	-2	-4	0		0
	EP2	0	0	-2	0	0	-2	-4	0		0
Child 7	EP1	0	-2		0		0	-7	0		
	EP2	0	0		0		0	+3	0		
Child 8	EP1	-1	0	0	+5		-2	-6	0	0	+7
	EP2	+2	+1	0	+5		0	0	0	+1	+9
Child 9	EP1	0	+1	0	+1	+2	0		-1		
	EP2	0	+2	+2	+3	+2	+1		-1		
Child 10	EP1	0	0	-2	-1	+2	0	0	0		+2
	EP2	+3	-1	-3	-3	0	-5	0	+1		0
Child 11	EP1	0		-1	0		0		-1		
	EP2	0		0	0		-1		-1		
Child 12	EP1	0	0	0	0		0	0	0		
	EP2	0	0	0	0		-1	0	0		

Figures represent the size of the differences in terms of the number of behaviour categories in the Let's Play ordered scale

Positive numbers represent a higher behaviour category rated by the EP rater

Negative numbers represent a lower behaviour category rated by the EP rater

0 indicates exact agreement between researcher's and raters' scores

 = toy not played with

4.2.2. Inter-rater: analysis by toy

Table 4.6. summarises the patterns of agreement across the various toys

Table 4.6. Inter-rater agreement across individual toys

Name of toy	Number of children choosing this toy (N=12)	Agreement between EP raters		Agreement between researcher and EPs	
		Number of observations where raters agree	Range of disagreement in categories	Number of observations where raters agree (2 ratings per child)	Range of disagreement in categories
Large toys	12	7 (58%)	4 categories	15 (63%)	4 categories
Miniatures	10	2 (20%)	3 categories	9 (45%)	4 categories
Locking shape sorter	8	3 (38%)	6 categories	7 (44%)	8 categories
Form board	10	7 (70%)	4 categories	10 (50%)	11 categories
Shapes and sorting tray	6	3 (50%)	2 categories	5 (42%)	4 categories
Abacus	10	5 (50%)	7 categories	11 (55%)	6 categories
Crayons, paper, scissors	8	4 (50%)	15 categories	8 (50 %)	10 categories
Nesting beakers	11	8 (73%)	2 categories	13 (59%)	2 categories
Ball	2	0	4 categories	2 (50%)	2 categories
Book	8	4 (50%)	4 categories	11 (69%)	11 categories

Caution needs to be taken in interpreting this information, as the numbers are so small. However, there appears to be some variation between toys:

- toys where inter-rater agreement is highest: large toys, form board, abacus, crayons, nesting beakers and book (all at or above 50% agreement) - both the abacus and crayons also have wide ranges of disagreement, indicating that,

for some raters at least, there are wide disparities in how behaviours on these toys were rated;

- toys where inter-rater agreement is lowest: miniatures and shape sorter (both below 50% agreement).

It is difficult to discern any differences between these two groups of toys; they both include different types of toys and toys with large and small numbers of categories on the rating scales.

4.2.3. Inter-rater: analysis by child

Table 4.7. shows the inter-rater agreement for individual children. Once again, caution needs to be taken when analysing these figures, as the number of observations for any child is very small.

Table 4.7. Inter-rater agreement across individual children

Child	Number of toys played with	Agreement between EP raters		Agreement between researcher and EPs	
		Number of observations where raters agree	Range of difference in categories	Number of observations where raters agree (2 ratings per child)	Range of difference in categories
1	6	2 (33%)	3 categories	6 (50%)	2
2	5	1 (20%)	4 categories	6 (60%)	5
3	8	4 (50%)	1 categories	8 (50%)	4
4	6	4 (66%)	1 categories	10(83%)	1
5	8	4 (50%)	3 categories	4 (25%)	8
6	9	7 (78%)	3 categories	9 (50%)	5
7	6	4 (66%)	9 categories	9 (75%)	10
8	9	3 (33%)	5 categories	8 (44%)	15
9	7	3 (43%)	1 categories	4 (29%)	4
10	9	1 (11%)	6 categories	8 (44%)	8
11	5	3 (60%)	2 categories	6 (60%)	1
12	7	6 (86%)	1 categories	13 (93%)	1

The highest levels of inter-rater agreement between the two EPs are for children 12, 6, 7 and 4 (all over 65%). These ratings involved 5 different EPs, with one of the EPs involved with 3 of the children. The lowest agreements between the two EPs were for children 10 and 2 (20% or lower) and interestingly these did not involve any of the 5 EPs involved in the children with the highest level of agreement. The children with the highest inter-rater agreement between the researcher and EP raters were children 12, 10 and 4 (agreements all above 75%) and the children where the agreement was lowest were children 5 and 9 (both below 30%). There was no distinction between the groups of EPs with the highest and lowest levels of agreement with the researcher, with some EPs being in both groups. If the agreement data is considered as a whole, it appears that the highest levels are for children 12 and 4, both of whom have amongst the highest ratings for all comparisons across different raters. These particular two children had difficulties that were arguably the most severe of those experienced by children in the sample group, suggesting that there may be something about developmentally earlier behaviours that makes rating more consistent. No illustrative examples will be given for this criterion, as the measures relate more to the raters and rating process rather than the actual assessment situation.

4.3. Criterion 3a: concurrent validity (pre-school)

Ten children took part in this section of the study (children 4 and 9 were not attending a pre-school setting). All the pre-schools approached were very happy to take part and released staff for the meeting without any difficulty. Often several

members of staff attended the meeting and contributed to the discussion. Staff were very familiar with the toys and needed minimal prompting to recognise the toys from the descriptions in Let's Play. Two of the children had not played with a particular toy in pre-school – for both these children the toy was not included in the analysis.

The time between the first play based assessment session and the interview with pre-school staff varied for different children. The average time interval was 12 days and for most of the children (8 of the 10) the time difference was between 5 and 12 days. However, for two children it was considerably longer (child 1: 33 days; child 2: 28 days). This was due to difficulties in arranging visits to preschools and for these two children this is not an ideal time interval for a measure of concurrent validity, as some developmental change may have occurred for the children.

4.3.1. Concurrent validity (pre-school): overall analysis

Table 4.8. outlines the pattern of agreement between the assessment and ratings by pre-school staff. In total there were 63 pairs of observations across the children and 16 of these were in agreement (25.4%). Cohen's kappa for the overall data was 0.18 (poor agreement according to Landis and Koch's guidelines).

Table 4.8 Concurrent agreement (pre-school) (summary of all children and all toys)


	symb	min	lock	form	shape	abacus	crayon	beak	ball	book
Child 1	0	-2		-1			-8			-7
Child 2						-1				+5
Child 3	-1	-1		0	-1		-8	0		-2
Child 4										
Child 5	-2	-5	0	0	-1		0	+1		-2
Child 6	+3	+1	0	-1		-2	+9	-2		-1
Child 7	-3	+1		-1		-2	-11	0		
Child 8	0	+3	0			-2	-4	0	-3	
Child 9										
Child 10	+2	+1	+5	+4		+3	+6	+2		-2
Child 11	+5		-2	0		-3		-1		
Child 12	0	+3	-1	0		0	-5	0		

Figures represent the size of the differences in terms of the number of behaviour categories in the Let's Play ordered scale

Positive numbers represent a higher behaviour category on second assessment session

Negative numbers represent a lower behaviour category on second assessment session

0 indicates exact agreement between the two scores

 = toy not played with

 = child not attending pre-school

Of the categories that did not agree, 31 (49% of all pairs of ranks) of ratings by pre-school staff were within one category level of the rating in the assessment. 31 (49 % of all observations) were lower on Let's Play than in pre-school and 16 (25 % of all observations) were higher on Let's Play. The range of disagreement between Let's Play and pre-school was from 11 ranks lower on Let's Play to 9 ranks higher. The distribution of category differences is shown in Figure 4.4.

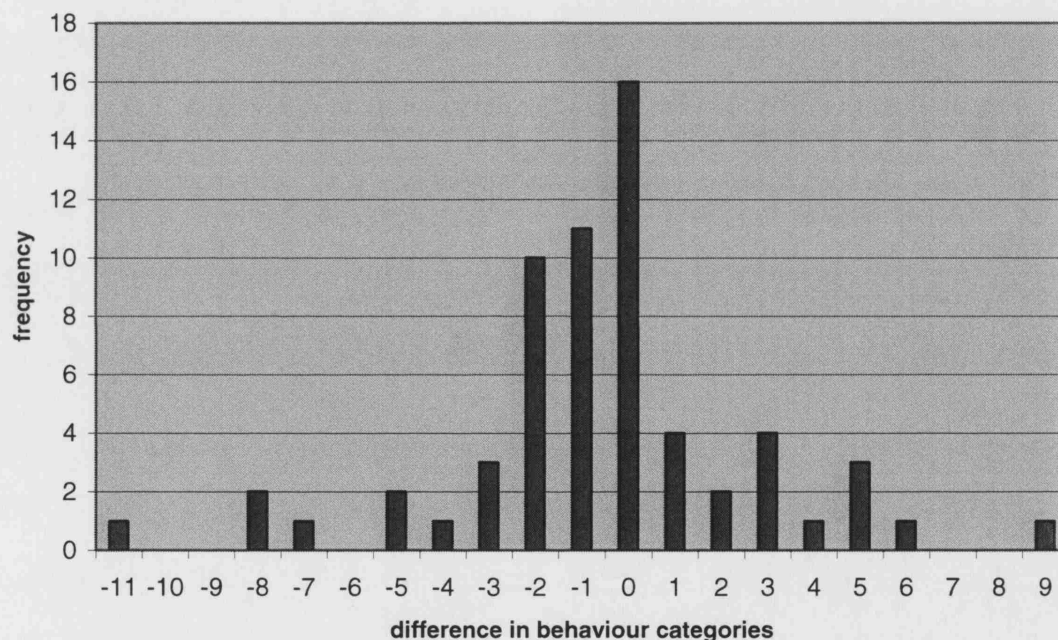


Figure 4.4. Distribution of concurrent measure differences (pre-school) (positive numbers represent a higher category on Let's Play)

Turning to the comments from pre-school staff recorded on the IFF sheets, 8 pre-schools reported good progress by the child. Generally staff were very positive and tended to focus on the child's progress rather than their areas of difficulty.

4.3.2. Concurrent (preschool): analysis by toy

Table 4.9. summarises the pattern of agreement in ranks across different toys.

Table 4.9. Concurrent agreement (preschool) across individual toys

Name of toy	Number of children who chose to use this toy (10 participants)	Number of observations where categories agree	Number of observations with lower category in Let's Play	Number of observations with higher category in Let's Play
Large toys	9	3 (33%)	3 (33%)	3 (33%)
Miniatures	8	0	3 (38%)	5 (63%)
Locking shape sorter	6	3 (50%)	2 (33%)	1 (17%)
Form board	8	4 (50%)	3 (38%)	1 (13%)
Shapes and sorting tray	2	0	2 (100%)	0
Abacus	7	1 (14%)	5 (71%)	1 (14%)
Crayons, paper, scissors	8	1 (13%)	5 (63%)	2 (25%)
Nesting beakers	8	4 (50%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)
Ball	1	0	1 (100%)	0
Book	6	0	5 (83%)	1 (17%)

The level of agreement does seem to vary between the different toys:

- toys with highest concurrent agreement: form board, shape sorter and nesting beakers (all 50%) - these are all problem-solving toys;
- toys with lowest concurrent agreement: crayons and abacus (13% and 14%).

The various toys also showed a range of difference in categories, although once again, caution needs to be exercised in analysing these, as some toys were played with by only a few children. Several differences in the ranges can be seen:

- toys with the smallest range of difference with the concurrent measure: shapes, nesting beakers and abacus – all visual problem solving toys (all within ± 3 categories);
- toys with the largest range of difference with the concurrent measure: crayons/paper/scissors (20 category range) and book (12 category range) – both toys involving early academic skills.

In the qualitative data pre-school staff tended to make comments about the children's play in general, rather than in relation to specific toys.

4.3.3. Concurrent (preschool): analysis by child

Table 4.10. summarises the agreement between pre-school ratings and the assessment for each child.

The variations between children can be summarised as follows:

- children with the highest agreement: child 12 (57%), child 8 (43%) child 5 (38%);
- children with the lowest agreement: child 2, and child 10 (both 0%).

There is no discernable difference between these two groups of children in terms of their ages, degree and type of SEN or the time interval between the Let's Play assessment and the pre-school interview.

Table 4.10. Concurrent agreement (pre-school) across individual children

Child	Number of toys played with	Number of toys where categories agree	Number of toys with lower category in Let's Play	Number of toys with higher category in Let's Play
1	5	1 (20%)	4 (80%)	0
2	2	0	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
3	7	2 (29%)	5 (71%)	0
4				
5	8	3 (38)	4 (50%)	1 (13%)
6	8	1 (13%)	4 (50%)	3 (38%)
7	6	1 (17%)	4 (67%)	1 (17%)
8	7	3 (43%)	3 (43%)	1 (14%)
9				
10	8	0	1 (13%)	7 (88%)
11	5	1 (20%)	3 (60%)	1 (20%)
12	7	4 (57%)	2 (29%)	1 (14%)

4.3.4. Illustrative examples

If the concurrent validity data is transformed into approximate developmental ages and combined with the qualitative data for each child, an impression of the impact of validity for various children's assessments can be gained.

Example A: child 12 (highest level of agreement between Let's Play and pre-school)

This child was aged 3 years 0 months and had quite significant learning difficulties across many areas of development. His profile is shown in Figure 4.5.

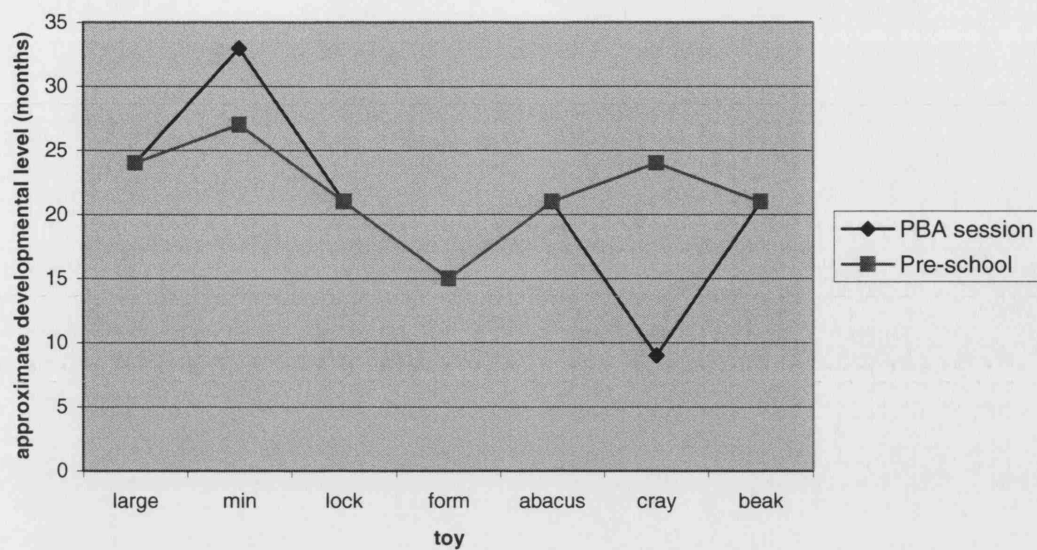


Figure 4.5. Concurrent validity (preschool) – child 12

As can be seen, this child achieved a similar developmental level across many of the toys, but did better on the miniatures and much worse on the crayons in the Let's Play assessment. This particular child was the only child who attended nursery full time and he was also the only child where the Let's Play assessment took place at pre-school rather than at home. Pre-school staff were not present at the assessment but it was nevertheless clearly more similar to the situation in which staff were rating his behaviour. The large difference in categories for the crayons may be due to motivation in the assessment, as in the first assessment session he showed no interest in the crayons.

Example B: child 10 (lowest agreement between Let's Play and pre-school)

This was the oldest child in the sample (4 years 9 months) and the only child who had experienced disrupted and potentially damaging circumstances in his early life. He had been living with his mother but had been moved to live with his father six months prior to the assessment. A year previously, he was showing very significant

delays in all areas of development, including significant behaviour problems. Since coming to live with his father, significant improvements in both his learning and behaviour had been noticed. His profile of skills is shown in Figure 4.6.

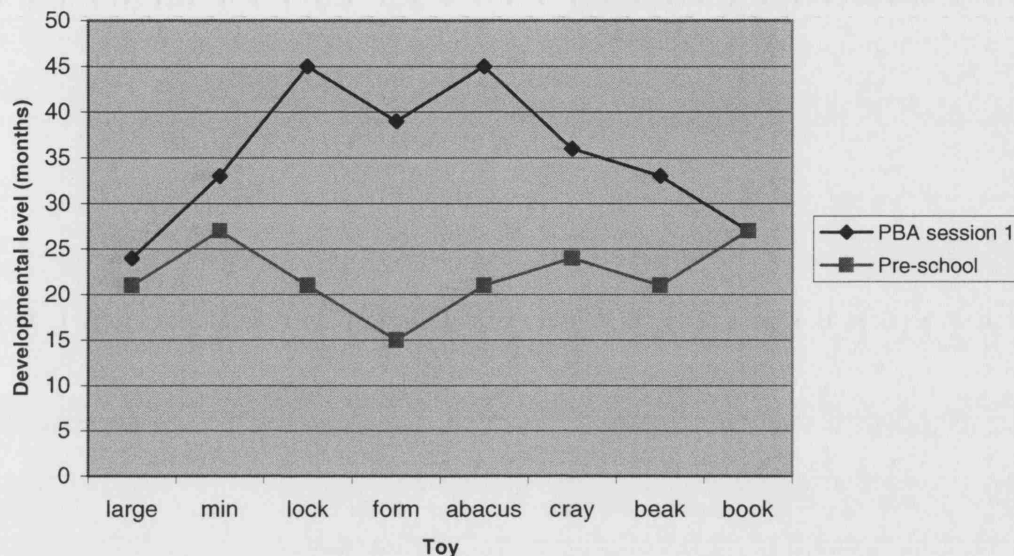


Figure 4.6. Concurrent validity (pre-school) - child 10

This child showed a very different profile between the two sets of ratings. The books were the only toy where he achieved the same developmental level, although his large toy play and play with miniatures was not too different (on both he did better in the assessment situation). For some of the toys (shape sorter, form board and abacus) there is a very significant difference in developmental levels between the two situations – with very significantly higher developmental levels in the assessment (up to approximately 2 years higher). This child responded exceptionally well to the Let's Play situation – engaging fully, really enjoying himself and concentrating well, and his father commented that he was surprised at how well he

had done in the assessment. He had been attending his current pre-school for only 6 months and staff reported that when he first started he would not talk at all and spent a lot of time crying. Staff were very surprised at how well he had done in the assessment and commented that they felt the difference showed what he could achieve when he was in an environment where he felt confident, i.e. home.

4.4. Criterion 3b: concurrent validity (Symbolic Play Test)

As the Symbolic Play Test (SPT) was conducted on the final visit, the time interval between the first Let's Play assessment and this criterion measure tended to be quite long. The interval ranged from 6 to 34 days with the average being 14 days. The longest intervals were for child 3 (34 days), child 1 (21 days) and child 4 (19 days). Once again, this was due to the difficulty of making appointments, and clearly for child 3 the time exceeded the desired maximum three week period.

4.4.1. Concurrent (Symbolic Play Test): overall analysis

The first level of analysis is to compare children's scores on the symbolic elements of Let's Play with their scores on the SPT. These comparisons are detailed in Table 4.11.

Table 4.11. Concurrent agreement (Symbolic Play Test)

Child	Score on SPT	Let's Play: sum of categories on symb and min
1	7	11
2	0	0
3	23	11
4	7	12
5	19	9
6	22	17
7	21	15
8	15	15
9	0	11
10	19	12
11	10	8
12	2	12

The first point to make is that two of the children did not engage with the SPT (children 2 and 9) - they both looked at the toys but could not be persuaded to play with them. In contrast, all the children engaged in the Let's Play session. The level of agreement between the scores for the group as a whole is not significant (Spearman's $\rho = .43$). If the two children who did not play with the SPT are excluded from the analysis, the degree of association is reduced considerably (Spearman's $\rho = .23$; not significant).

A fuller impression of the differential approach of children to the two assessments can be gained through examination of the comments on the IFF sheets. Some of the children responded to the SPT really well, some were very reluctant to engage and needed lots of encouragement, and some responded well to some of the SPT toys but would not play with others. For example, child 6 said 'no thanks' when the SPT toys were first shown to him, and child 8 said 'I'm not gonna play that' when they were

first shown. In contrast, child 7 responded much more enthusiastically and seemed to enjoy the clearly defined tasks. From the IFF sheets there is not any apparent balance in favour of any one of these approaches.

In order to look at the level of agreement between the two sets of scores, the Let's Play scores were transformed into approximate developmental levels. Because this transformation has been made, these figures should be treated with some caution and therefore only graphical and descriptive analysis will be used. These results are shown in Table 4.12.

Table 4.12. Concurrent agreement in developmental levels (Symbolic Play Test)
(developmental level in months)

Child	Play age on SPT	Approximate age on Let's Play (average of symb and min)	Difference (to the nearest month)
1	15.3	25.5	+10
2	0	0	N/A
3	36+	28.5	-8
4	15.3	28.5	+13
5	31.1	25.5	-6
6	35	45	+10
7	33.7	37.5	+4
8	25.8	37.5	+12
9	0	25.5	N/A
10	31.1	28.5	- 3
11	20.6	24	-3
12	12	28.5	+17

It is interesting to note that all the children with larger differences (children 9, 12, 4, 8, 1,6) have much higher scores on Let's Play. The general pattern seems to be for broadly similar levels but with significantly higher developmental levels on Let's

Play for some children. The association between the two measures is shown graphically in Figure 4.7.

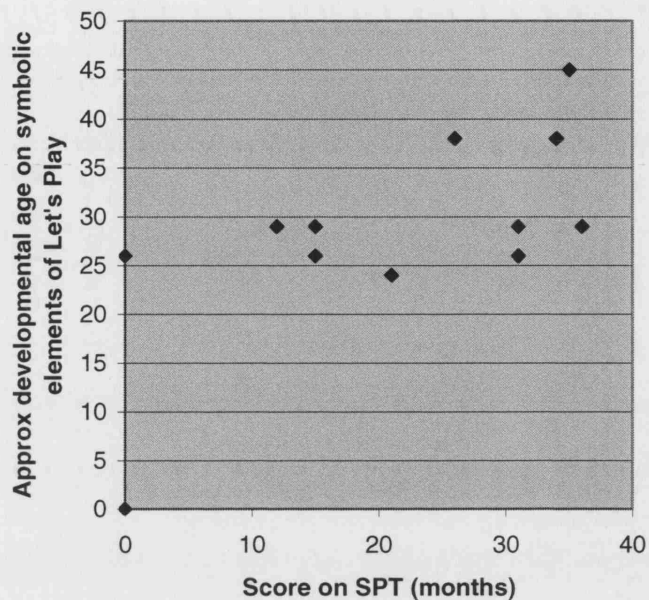


Figure 4.7. Concurrent validity association between ages on Symbolic Play Test and the symbolic elements of Let's Play

4.4.2. Concurrent (Symbolic Play Test): analysis by child

As mentioned in the previous section, the children varied in relation to the degree of agreement between the two measures and these can be summarised as follows:

- highest level of agreement: child 10 (3 months lower on Let's Play), child 11 (3 months lower) and child 7 (4 months higher);
- lowest level of agreement: child 9 (who did not play with SPT but did well in Let's Play), child 12 (17 months higher on Let's Play) and child 4 (13 months higher).

4.4.3. Illustrative examples

Example A: child 10 (highest concurrent agreement with Symbolic Play Test)

Interestingly, this was also the child who had the largest discrepancy between Let's Play and play in pre-school. He was a child who had experienced very unsettled early experiences but who had responded particularly well in the Let's Play assessment. His scores were as follows:

Score on SPT	Approximate age on Let's Play
31.1 months	28.5 months

Comments from the IFF sheet indicate that he did not play with the first set of toys on the SPT (doll, cup etc) but that he responded very well to the next three toys. This child also continued to play with the various toys once the assessment was over – and was able to combine them in novel ways, e.g. using the tablecloth as a bed cover; putting the cup on the doll's head as a hat and showing this to the adults and laughing. With the exception of the first set of toys, his approach to the SPT was exceptionally good.

Example B: child 12 (Lowest concurrent agreement Symbolic Play Test)

In contrast with the child described above, this was the child who had the highest agreement between Let's Play and play in pre-school.

This child's scores were as follows:

Score on SPT	Approximate age on Let's Play
12 months	28.5 months

Once again, this child showed a differential approach to the sets of toys in the SPT. He would not play with the first three (and therefore did not score on them) but played really well with the fourth set (tractor and trailer). As the scoring system in

the SPT is based on the total number of symbolic skills shown across all four sets of toys, his score on this test was greatly reduced. In contrast, his score on Let's Play was based only on the highest level of symbolic play he showed.

4.5. Criterion 4: face validity/taker rapport

The data collected for this criterion was very different to the quantitative criteria outlined above. To assist the reader, the data collection methods for this criterion will be briefly revisited (see Table 4.13.).

Table 4.13. Summary of data collection methods for face validity/taker rapport

Aspect of the criterion	Sources of information	Data collection method
Face validity	Parent's views of pros and cons of the play-based assessment	Semi- structured interview
Test-taker rapport	Assessor's views on the children's approach	Let's Play Guide 2, recorded on IFF sheet
	Parent's views on the children's approach	Semi- structured interview
	Parents own experiences of the play-based session	Semi- structured interview

4.5.1. Face validity

Eight parents completed the semi-structured interview (the parents of children 5-12) but unfortunately it was not possible to prepare the interview schedule in time to use

it with the parents of children 1-4. All of the respondents were the children's mothers, except for children 7 and 10 where they were the children's fathers.

The structured interview contained two questions relating specifically to face validity:

- From your perspective as a parent, what do you think are the main strengths of play-based assessment? (Question 4)
- From your perspective as a parent, what do you think are the main disadvantages? (Question 5)

Due to the small sample size, it is only possible to draw out a few tentative themes from the interviews. The key strengths perceived by the parents related to use of the familiar play situation, the fact that more information can be obtained, and a view that the assessment is fun/relaxed. Table 4.14. gives a summary of the various areas of strength perceived by the parents, along with illustrative examples of comments (a full summary of the field notes is given in Appendix 19).

Turning to views on disadvantages, there were certainly fewer comments about these and two of the parents said they could think of no disadvantages. As a result, only a small number of comments were collected and it is difficult to draw out any themes from such a small sample. However, 3 of the parents did identify the potential for misleading outcomes – each of them for different reasons. Table 4.15. gives a summary of the perceived disadvantages.

Table 4.14. Summary of parents' views on the strengths of play-based assessment – key themes

Theme	Number of parents mentioning this theme	Examples from notes
Uses familiar play situation and toys	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's like a play situation – they think you're a friend here to play. • Toys – he's in his own element.
Provides more information	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You get a better picture of what a child can do. • Gives a view of their intelligence – lots of information.
Fun/relaxed	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's fun. • Formal would not be as relaxing.
Unstructured/gives child choice	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Its not structured, so they don't have to do anything they don't want to do – they can spend as long as they want.
Interesting/engaging	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging his interest – which is difficult!
Based at home	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In his own environment – doesn't like hospitals.
Interactive nature	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All children need encouragement to join in and some idea of what you want them to do.

Table 4.15. Summary of parents' views on the disadvantages of play-based assessment – key themes

Theme	Number of parents mentioning this theme	Examples from notes
Misleading outcomes (for a range of reasons)	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You could be leading and telling them...and get a false idea of what they can do. • If they see it as play they might not give you as much as they could. • Knowledge of person giving the test is important – they understand the assessment – could be misleading if not.
Range of toys	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some of it's not that interesting – he sees them as young. • Would be better to have some things that make noises.
Other comments	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal test - can see how they've failed.
	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depends on age and what they can do.
	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If he doesn't do well – could be difficult.
	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depends on the marking.

4.5.2. Test taker rapport

This aspect of the criterion contained two sources of information – the assessor’s views on the children’s approach to Let’s Play and several questions in the parent interview. The researcher’s comments included all 12 children but only the parents of children 5-12 were interviewed (the same parents as for the face validity measure).

The researcher’s views on the children’s approach

Comments from IFF sheets relating to the children’s approach to the two Let’s Play sessions were collated, giving 131 comments across the 12 children (see Appendix 18 for a full list of the comments). At a basic level these comments can be categorised according to their positivity:

- positive (a skill or desirable approach) – 94 comments;
- neutral (an observation or a comment with both positive and negative elements) – 29 comments;
- negative (a problem or difficulty in approach) – 8 comments.

This indicates that most comments about the children’s approach were positive, with very few relating to difficulties in the assessment session. On closer inspection, there is also some evidence of variations in comments between individual children. If only the negative comments are considered, these focus on certain children - child 5 (3 negatives), child 7 (3 negatives) and child 11 (2 negatives). These comments relate to areas such as reluctance to play with some of the toys, needing all the assessor’s attention to engage the child in play, low/no eye contact, and little/no language alongside play. Significantly, these were the three children in the study who had

social and communication difficulties and the comments link to the aspects of the social play situation they were likely to have found difficult.

The comments on the IFF sheets were also categorised according to the three areas in the Let's Play Guide 2 (affective, interaction during assessment, approach to task).

No significant differences were found between the three categories – with all three being used equally. As mentioned previously, the negative comments tended to relate to comments in the 'interaction to assessment' category and reflected the difficulties of three particular children in relation to interactive skills.

Parents' views on their child's approach.

Parents' perceptions were gained through question 2 on the parent interview:

- Thinking about the two play-based assessment sessions – how do you feel your child responded to these?

Eight parents answered this question and all their comments were positive, including those for children who had received some negative comments from the assessor.

Many of the comments were exceptionally positive e.g. 'fantastic', 'he loved it', 'wonderful'. A full summary of the responses is given in Appendix 20. Several key themes were identified in the parent's answers and these are shown in Table 4.16.

The comments and themes tend to relate to affective aspects of the child's approach.

Table 4.16. Parents' comments on their child's approach to Let's Play –key themes

Theme	Number of parents mentioning this theme	Examples from notes
Liked/enjoyed	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He loved it
Responded to range of toys/choice	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was always something he was interested in
Relaxed/calm	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calm when played (can get overexcited with new toys)
Showed good skills/did well	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did well – better than a formal assessment
Good rapport/interaction	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Built a rapport with you very quickly
Liked the attention	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likes being centre of attention
Persisted	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He tried and tried

Parents' comments on their own feelings

As important recipients of the assessment process, parents were asked how they had felt during the Let's Play assessment. This information was gathered through question 3 on the parental interview:

- How did you feel when watching the play-based assessment/afterwards?

Six of the parents answered this question, with the other two parents saying that they were not sure. Again, the small sample makes it difficult to draw out any main themes from the comments but they did focus on positive feelings and feelings of surprise at the skills their child showed. The only negative comments were where parents had queries about the assessment process - one parent feeling unsure of what to do and one wondering how her child compared with other children. The key themes in the responses are shown in Table 4.17. (a full summary of all the comments is given in Appendix 21).

Table 4.17. Parents' comments on their own feelings during Let's Play – key themes

Theme	Number of parents mentioning this theme	Examples from notes
Positive affect	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proud • You get pleasure seeing you child do well • Happy • Quite enjoyed it – it's a luxury to take time out to watch him – in an environment where he's enjoying himself
Positively surprised	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pleasantly surprised • Skills I didn't know about • Impressed by the pretend play he could do – amazed at the things he's done • He astonished me the first time • Encouraging to see he <i>can</i> do some things
Unsure of role	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First session – I didn't know what to do
Interested in comparisons	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It would be interesting to compare with what another child of his age would do

4.6. Criterion 5: construct validity

No specific data was gathered for this criterion, as it used a combination of data collected for all the other criteria. However, there were certain comments from the parental interviews that related directly to the construct of play. These, as recorded in the field notes, are listed below:

- It's like a play situation – fun – they think you're a friend here to play.
- Played lovely.
- Play is such a great thing – it's how they learn.
- Toys – he's in his own element.
- Not so alien to them – he's used to toys.
- I thought he'd done well – but he's good at play.
- Playing with toys – get more from child – more at their level. I don't think a test situation would work.

These comments seem to indicate that at least some of the parents perceived the behaviour in the assessment as genuine play, although of they may of course have been responding to the phrase 'play-based assessment' in the questions. The last comment is particularly interesting because it indicates that the parent perceived this assessment as play rather than a test and spontaneously made this comparison.

4.7. Summary

A range of data was collected for the 12 children in relation to the five evaluation criteria. Many of the problems experienced in the pilot study were successfully overcome and this made it possible to collect a comprehensive range of data (see Table 4.18.).

Table 4.18. Summary of data collected across the five criteria

Criterion 1: Test- retest reliability

- Let's Play had 'fair' test-retest reliability.
- Children tended to be more settled and interactive in the second session.
- Toys focusing on imaginative play may be played with less consistently than visual problem - solving toys.
- Test-retest reliability varied between children, possibly with the nature of the children's difficulties having an impact (lowest for young children with complex medical needs).

Criterion 2: Inter-rater reliability

- Let's Play had 'fair' levels of inter-rater reliability.
- Some behaviours rated by the EP observers had not been recorded by the researcher.
- Levels of agreement varied between toys, but there was no clear pattern across different types of toy.
- There were also differences between children, with the children with the most severe difficulties obtaining the highest rater agreement.
- There were also differences in the level of agreement between the pairs of raters.

Criterion 3: Concurrent validity

- Let's Play showed 'poor' concurrent agreement with ratings of play at pre-school.
- Some toys seemed to be played with in particularly different ways in pre-school.
- The degree of agreement with play in pre-school varied considerably between children.
- Let's Play showed good concurrent correlation with the Symbolic Play Test, although children tended to show more advanced play in Let's Play.
- Children responded differentially to Let's Play and the SPT.

Criterion 4: face validity/taker rapport

- Let's Play had very good face-validity for parents, although some possible shortcomings were perceived.
- All children responded positively to the assessment situation.
- The assessment was also a positive emotional experience for parents.
- The assessment was a positive and useful process for the assessor.

Criterion 5: construct validity

- The parents' comments indicated that they perceived their child's behaviour as play.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

5.1. Theoretical implications

The theoretical implications of the study will be discussed in relation to the findings for each of the evaluation criteria and in terms of the research questions set out in chapter 1. The theoretical implications of the overall pattern of reliability and validity will then be discussed following examination of the individual criteria.

5.1.1. Criterion 1: test-retest reliability

The finding that Let's Play had only 'fair' test-retest reliability (kappa category of 'fair') indicates that there were some differences in children's play behaviour across the two sessions but that a degree of consistency was achieved. This finding is difficult to relate to the literature because of the lack of research into semi-structured tests. The test-retest reliability of structured tests of play tends to be good (e.g. Lowe & Costello, 1988) and good reliability has also been reported for tools that focus specifically on aspects of play rather than general development (e.g. Belsky & Most, 1981; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Two unpublished evaluations of a semi-structured test (TPBA) do report good test-retest reliability, (Cornett, 1999; Friedli, 1995), although the exact level is not given in the abstracts of these studies. However, Let's Play is unlike TPBA in many respects and, in particular, is based on a close and specific interaction with one assessor rather than a multi-agency

approach. As will be seen from the discussion below, this relationship may be important in Let's Play's lower test-retest reliability.

Of particular interest is the finding that the children's approach and interaction in the second session was qualitatively different for most of the children (11 of the 12).

The finding that children tended to show more positive interaction in the second session is perhaps not surprising, given that the first session was the first time they had met the researcher or encountered this particular play situation. It seems likely that the child and assessor will be more familiar with each other in the second session and that this may affect the quality of their interaction. Existing evaluation studies have looked only at agreement in ratings or scores of play behaviour over test-retest intervals but, as described above, the current study suggests that for Let's Play there are also important qualitative changes across sessions.

It is important to recognise that, as Kline (2000) points out, a test's reliability (including test-retest) may be influenced by a range of factors outside of the instrument itself. As mentioned previously, the researcher was more familiar with the child in the second session and, given the potential for observer bias (Foster, 1996), it is possible that the researcher may have therefore rated the behaviours differently. More generally, the two assessment situations represented slightly different social situations in terms of factors such as familiarity, number of adults present, etc. The literature suggests that contextual factors may influence the play elicited (Rogers, 1982; Rubin & Howe, 1985) and so it seems reasonable to conclude that such differences may also have contributed to differences in the children's play and approach between the two sessions.

The study also identified possible differences in test-retest reliability across toys, with problem solving toys showing better reliability than imaginative and interactive toys. At this stage, these findings are only tentative due to the small number of observations with each toy but they do link with the literature on play with different toys. Despite the lack of research in this area (Rubin & Howe, 1985), it has been found that familiar toys elicit less exploratory play and more imaginative play (Garvey, 1991; Lidz, 2000). It may be that because the children are more familiar with the toys in the second situation, they are able to extend and develop their play, particularly on those toys with more imaginative elements. It is also possible that the changes noted in children's confidence, interaction and engagement between the two sessions could have more impact on imaginatively based toys, particularly in light of research suggesting that a lack of familiarity with the play situation/play partner can inhibit imaginative play (Garvey, 1991; Lidz, 2003; Mogford-Bevan, 2002).

The study also found that test-retest reliability varied between children, with those achieving the highest consistency having shorter test-retest intervals (all less than a week). This may not be surprising given the general findings in the literature that test-retest reliabilities for young children are better over shorter periods (Anastasi 1990). However, there were also some interesting patterns of reliability across children. For example, the highest test-retest reliability was for a child who had a diagnosis of autism. Given that this child played with a wide range of toys on both occasions, this supports Water's (1999) claim that the test is accessible to children with autism. The general literature on the play of children with autism is not clear (Sayeed & Guerin, 2000) but difficulties with social interaction and repetitive actions in play have been observed (Linder, 1990). However, for this particular child, these

difficulties, although present, did not preclude engagement in play across both sessions and it may be that his difficulties with social interaction meant that the effects of changes in social situation across the two sessions were less significant. In contrast, the two children with the lowest test re-test agreement were both aged only two and had complex, medically based behavioural and learning difficulties. Reviews of the play of children with SEN (e.g. Linder, 1990; Sayeed & Guerin, 2000) do not throw much light on this finding, as the categories of SEN used are so broad. However, it may be that these two children were more susceptible to an unfamiliar play situation, or that they were harder to engage in play when the assessor did not know them. Looking beyond within-child factors, it may also be that, due to the complex nature of their difficulties, it was easier for the researcher to observe their play in the second session once they were more familiar with the children.

Overall, the findings indicate that although Let's Play performs to a 'fair' level with respect to test-retest reliability, there may be some dangers in using it as a one-off assessment. In particular, the second session may facilitate a more interactive approach from the children. The Let's Play manual (Waters, 1999) does not recommend that the test is used in a single session measure but neither does it recommend carrying out more than one assessment session. It is not unique in this respect, and many play-based assessment models are based around a single assessment session (e.g. Belsky & Most, 1981; Coupe & Levy, 1985; Mogford-Bevan, 2002; Lidz, 2003). Only Sayeed and Guerin (2000) and Linder (1990) mention carrying out two sessions. Sayeed and Guerin's model is particularly relevant as they raise the possibility of carrying out the interactive phase of

assessment in a second session. They do not recommend this strongly, or provide a rationale, but their model would certainly fit with the findings of the current study, as children seemed to show more interaction in the second session. More generally, assessment over time is a principle of good assessment practice for EPs (BPS, 1999; Shah *et al.*, 1997) and has been supported in the literature on pre-school assessment (Lidz, 2000; Wolfendale & Robinson, 2001). It has also been stressed that young children need familiar, unthreatening assessment environments (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett 2000; Wilson, 1998), and that their development tends to be non-linear and intermittent (Wilson, 1998). Single session play-based assessments would therefore appear to be of limited use for young children, and it may be preferable to use Let's Play over at least two sessions.

5.1.2. Criterion 2: inter-rater reliability

The study showed that Let's Play has 'fair' inter-rater reliability, both in terms of agreement between EP raters watching videos and between the researcher carrying out live ratings and the EP raters watching videos. These findings are not directly comparable with the high inter-rater reliability found on the Smilansky Scale (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990), as Let's Play covers a more diverse range of play skills and involves interaction between an assessor and a child, rather than just observation. It is also not in agreement with the high levels of inter-rater reliability found in external evaluations carried out by Farmer-Dougan and Kaszuba (1999) and Anthony (2003), although once again both these assessment models covered a much narrower range of behaviours. The study also differed from many of the previous investigations because it did not look at inter-rater correlations between scores or

developmental levels. Instead, it looked at agreement between behaviour categories. This is significant, given that Mogford-Bevan (2002) found that for her assessment tool agreement was not found for behaviour categories. Mogford-Bevan suggests that this indicates that observers may need training to ensure consistency, but the finding from this study indicates that EPs do not require specific training in using Let's Play before they can rate behaviours with a degree of accuracy.

Despite the 'fair' overall inter-rater scores, there were seven observations where both of the EP raters recorded an observation where the researcher had not (these missed observations were included in the overall inter-rater statistic). This suggests that assessors who are actively involved in the assessment may miss some play behaviours. It is not possible to compare this finding with previous evaluations, as the studies by Anthony (2003), Farmer-Dougan and Kaszuba (1999) and Mogford-Bevan (2002) all used independent raters who did not take part in the assessment. Similarly, the evaluation reported by Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) was of a tool where adults do not interact with the child. Let's Play is a very interactive tool and, although the dynamic assessment element was not used in the study, the assessor still interacted with and facilitated the child's play. This does not seem to have unduly compromised the researcher's observations, although occasionally behaviours were missed.

The variation in inter-rater reliability between toys may reflect the degree of gradation and specificity of the rating scales for different toys, which may lead to differential interpretation by raters. However, it may also be related to the different types of play elicited by the different toys. For example, if play is considered in

relation to categories such as exploratory, locomotor, imaginative and symbolic (Bruce 1996; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998), it can be seen that observing play involves observing a range of different types of behaviour. Let's Play covers all these types of play, with different toys often focusing on different play types, and it is therefore possible that some scales will contain more readily observable behaviours than others. For example 'relates toys to each other briefly' (Symbolic play- large toys) seems a more general and nebulous behaviour than 'posts sphere in correct hole' (shape sorter). However, once again these subtle differences did not overly compromise the overall reliability of the tool.

The considerable variation between children in terms of inter-rater reliability may result from several factors. For those children where it was low, this may be due to features of the child's behaviour or assessment situation. The finding that the highest agreements across all raters were for children with the most significant needs suggests that there is something about their behaviour that may make it more accurately observable. Linder (1990) has suggested that children with learning difficulties show a more restricted repertoire of play skills and therefore these children showed may have shown less complex play that was easier to rate. However, it is difficult to draw too many conclusions from such a small sample, particularly as each child had a different set of raters. This may also have been a key factor in determining their particular inter-rater score.

Overall, the inter-rater reliability of Let's Play appears to be 'fair' and this indicates that scores reflect children's behaviour rather than rater biases. Let's Play involves a single observer assessing the child whilst simultaneously supporting and facilitating

play, and its inter-rater reliability is therefore notable. Many other play-based models make use of video recordings for ratings (Coupe & Levy, 1985; Linder, 1990; Mogford-Bevan, 2002; Newson, 1979; Smith *et al.*, 1996), or several use multiple raters (Newson, 1979; Linder, 1990). These techniques are likely to further improve the accuracy of observations, but as the studies of inter-rater reliability carried out to date do not involve these techniques, it is not possible to know how they might improve reliability. It is possible that the inter-rater reliability of Let's Play could be further enhanced by using videotapes or multiple raters, particularly for children with more developmentally advanced play. However, further research is needed to investigate this more fully. It is also important that, as with other assessment techniques, users are aware of the potential for bias from their own beliefs (BPS, 1999) and the impact this may have on their in their observations.

5.1.3. Criterion 3: concurrent validity

Pre-school

Let's play showed 'poor' concurrent agreement with the measure of play in pre-school and this contradicts some of the existing research in the area. For example, Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) found good agreements for the Smilansky Scale for both observations of pre-school play and teachers' ratings of play. However, their scale covers a much narrower range of play skills than Let's Play, and it is possible that this makes observations across the two situations more consistent. The Smilansky Scale is also an assessment that can take place in pre-school, and this may further enhance consistency. The findings of this study do, however, fit with the study by Malone *et al.* (1994) who found little agreement between play in a

structured situation at home and play observed at pre-school and suggested that children show different cognitive skills in their play at home than in the pre-school.

The difference between the two situations may, of course, be due to factors other than differences in the children's play skills. In the study, different adults (researcher and pre-school staff) used different information, to rate play in the two situations. These different raters may perceive, observe and record behaviour in different ways and, given the potential for bias in observations (Foster, 1996), this may well have been the case. In addition, the samples of behaviour available to the researcher and pre-school staff were very different – a single live observation in a single situation versus recollections over a long period of time and a wider range of situations. The pre-school staff also knew the child very well, had built a relationship with them and may have therefore viewed their skills in a different way. Finally, in the interview pre-school staff may have wanted to present the child in a positive light to the researcher and this could represent a threat to the internal validity of the interview responses (Cresswell, 1994). However, returning to the investigation by Malone *et al.* (1994), the differences found in the study may also be a reflection of genuine differences in play across the two situations. In their study, Malone and colleagues controlled variables such as the sample of play (all were videos) and rater bias (independent pre-trained raters) to obtain a more direct comparison of play. The differences found for Let's Play may therefore reflect genuine differences in play, rather than observer bias. The suggestion that the two different contexts may have elicited genuinely different play is also supported by the literature, as the assessment and pre-school situations differ with respect to several areas that are known to impact on play. For example, Let's Play takes place in a smaller space and may therefore

encourage more social interaction and sharing of dramatic play themes (Rubin & Howe, 1985). It occurs in the familiar home situation, which may result in more social play (Rogers, 1982), and there may be differences in play partners that may influence the quality and quantity of the play (Pellegrini, 2000; Rogers, 1982; Smith *et al.*, 1998). In summary, there are a range of contextual differences between the pre-school and Let's Play situations that may elicit different types of play.

The finding that there was greater consistency across the two situations for problem-solving toys may reflect the differential effect of contextual factors on play with various toys. However, as Rubin and Howe (1985) note, there is a lack of literature on play with different toys, so it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions. It is also important to remember that, once again, the differences may be due to the way in which the ratings were obtained. For example, some toys may have developmental scales that are more clearly defined and so lend themselves to greater consistency, or pre-school staff may pay closer attention to play behaviours that are seen as important in the pre-school curriculum and therefore rate these more accurately. However, at this stage the data does not allow conclusions to be drawn.

The differences found in concurrent agreement between children were relatively small, with no child having high agreement. There is no clear picture of these differences between children but the illustrative examples do give some indication of the factors that could be operating. Factors such as the child's level of pre-school attendance and their ability to cope with the demands of the pre-school situation could be having some effect, given the influence of situational factors on play found in the literature (outlined above). The child whose scores had the lowest concurrent

agreement had emotional and behavioural difficulties and this links with the finding that the play of children with these types of difficulties is particularly susceptible to contextual influences (Sayeed & Guerin, 2000). There is also some suggestion from the illustrative examples that concurrent validity with pre-school is better when assessment takes place in the pre-school rather than at home, once again underlining the possible effects of context on play. At this stage, these can only be tentative suggestions based on single examples, and further investigation will be needed before any conclusions can be drawn.

Symbolic Play Test

The poor concurrent validity found between Let's Play and this test is in line with the low agreement with the play in pre-school. As far as the literature on play-based assessment is concerned, there have been no previous evaluations of play-based tools in relation to each other, with the focus tending to be on comparisons with standardised cognitive tests (e.g. the Batelle Developmental Inventory). This study suggests that the forms of play-based assessment are measuring different skills and there is some suggestion that Let's Play may elicit more advanced play behaviours. It should be remembered, however, that only certain aspects of Let's Play were compared with the SPT, so this is not a true measure of the relationship between the two tools.

The fact that the children who engaged in both tests obtained similar or higher developmental levels on Let's Play suggests that Let's Play elicits slightly more developmentally complex play. It is possible that children perceive it as a more familiar, relaxed play situation and such situations are known to elicit more advanced

play (Rogers, 1982; Rubin & Howe, 1985; Smith *et al.*, 1998). It could also be argued that Let's Play is more varied, interactive and interesting to children and this may aid motivation and enables children to show their skills (Cronbach, 1990; Lidz, 1983; Pellegrini, 2001; Ulrey & Schnell, 1982). The SPT and Let's Play are certainly very different forms of play assessment in terms of their degree of structure and the breadth of their focus, despite the fact that they are both based on play. It is therefore not surprising that there are some differences in the way that children approached them and in the developmental levels they achieved. The differences could, of course, also be due to external factors rather than genuine differences in the tools or play situations. For example, the researcher's greater familiarity with Let's Play and their preference for informal assessments over standardised tests may have meant that they perceived and rated the play in Let's Play more positively. It is also important to remember that not all the children played with the toys in the SPT and this suggests that for this test there are some difficulties in engaging children – a difficulty recognised in much of the literature on pre-school assessment (Cronbach, 1990; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000; Thurman & Widerstrom, 1990; Waters, 1999). Let's Play engaged all the children, lending support to claims that it is accessible to children with a range of needs (Waters, 1999).

The qualitative data suggests that most children showed a different approach across the two assessment tools. Once again this indicates the importance of qualitative information as well as developmental levels and play categories. It may also link to the findings on test-retest reliability, as the SPT took place on the third home visit, by which time the researcher and child had got to know each other and the assessment situation was much more familiar.

The overall pattern of concurrent validity

The relationship between Let's Play and the two concurrent measures suggests that the play seen in Let's Play may not relate to play in other 'real' situations or the play observed in a different type of play-based assessment situation. In terms of the range of play-based assessments, Let's Play and the SPT are at different places along the continuum of structure, with Let's Play being more unstructured, child-focused and interactive. The findings suggest that these factors may elicit different approaches to play for certain children, and that these elements may facilitate more advanced play. Play-based assessment is clearly a very broad term that covers a wide range of assessment approaches and therefore it is not surprising that children may show different skills when different assessment tools are used. The lack of concurrent validity with real situations suggests that, whatever types of play the tools are assessing, it may not relate to play in real life situations. In relation to play-based assessment generally, this suggests that it may be appropriate to carry out assessments in a range of contexts, and this fits with Wolfendale's (1997) comments about the importance of situation-specific pre-school assessment and the importance of observing children within natural environments (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000; Pellegrini, 1987).

The concurrent validity of unstructured tools such as the socio-cognitive play matrix is reasonably well established (Farmer- Dougan & Kaszuba, 1999; Pellegrini, 1987) and the concurrent validity of structured tests of play, such as the SPT has also been established (Doswell, 1991; Lowe & Costello, 1988). However, there is only a small and slightly contradictory literature on the concurrent validity of semi-structured tools (all the studies look at TPBA). Overall, it suggests good concurrent validity

with standardised assessment tools (Friedli, 1995; Malone *et al.*, 1994) and lower concurrent validity with play in pre-school (Malone *et al.*, 1994), although there are also contrasts to this pattern (e.g. Cornett, 1999; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

Overall, the pattern of concurrent validity across various tools and measures is unclear, but the findings of the current study do link with some of the findings for TPBA. The study adds to the existing findings by using a different semi-structured tool and comparing across tools as well as real play situations.

Many semi-structured play-based assessment tools focus on play in assessment centres (e.g. Lidz, 2003; Linder, 1990; Newson, 1979; Smith *et al.*, 1996,) but Let's Play can take place in several different settings – home, pre-school and assessment centres. The study suggests that not only may it be appropriate to assess in different contexts, it may also be desirable to also include direct observations of the children's play in pre-school. This would link well to good practice in general pre-school assessment by embedding assessment in real life situations and assessing across contexts (Barnet *et al.*, BPS, 1999; Newton, 1988; Shah *et al.*, 1997; Wolfendale, 1997; Wolfendale & Robinson, 2001).

5.1.4. Criterion 4: face validity/taker rapport

Face validity

Let's Play showed good face validity from parents' perspectives and only a few shortcomings were mentioned. Face validity is the most thoroughly evaluated aspect of play-based assessment tools and various studies have investigated this feature.

These include evaluations by the original test designers (e.g. Sayeed & Guerin, 2000;

Smith *et al.*, 1996) as well as independent studies (Dudley, 2001; Myers *et al.*, 1996). The findings of the current study are in line with evaluations of parents' positive perceptions of semi-structured tools (Myers *et al.*, 1996; Smith *et al.*, 1996). The discovery by Myers *et al.*, (1996) that parents rated both TPBA and a standardised assessment tool equally highly has important implications for the interpretation of the results of the current study. It is possible that the parents' comments may not have related to specifically to Let's Play but may have reflected the assessment process in general, i.e. they may have rated other assessment tools equally as positively. In the study, there were at least two parents who spontaneously made a less favourable reference to more formal approaches but there were also parents who felt that useful information could also be obtained through a more formal assessment. The lack of a comparative measure limits the interpretation of the findings of the current study, but it can still be concluded that parents rated Let's Play positively.

Interestingly, the parents' positive comments related to many of the areas identified in the literature as being particular strengths of play-based assessment. For example, using a familiar situation (Linder, 1990; Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001), being interesting for children (Pellegrini, 2001), being interactive (Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001) and providing more information (Linder, 1990; Pellegrini, 2001; Rogers, 1982). Some of the parents also commented that they were surprised and impressed by the skills their child had shown and this supports the view that play-based assessment may allow the assessor to see the leading edge of a child's development (Mogford-Bevan, 2000). The parents' comments also suggest that they see play as important and that they may identify with the more progressive features of play-based assessment – at least when they fed back to the researcher in this

particular situation. The strengths identified by parents are very much in contrast with traditional views of the EP assessment as formalised, adult controlled, removed from real-life situations and based on psychometrics (Boxer *et al.*, 1998; Buck, 1998; Lokke *et al.*, 1997; Shah *et al.*, 1997).

Overall, the study provides good evidence of Let's Play's face validity. This is important, given that lack of face validity is a shortcoming of many psychological tests (Martin, 2002). However, this finding needs to be considered within the debate about whether face validity is an important feature of psychological assessment tools (Cronbach, 1990; Roberts, 2000) and it should be remembered that face validity alone does not indicate that a test is valid.

Test taker rapport

The overwhelmingly positive comments about children's engagement in Let's Play from both the parents and researcher is indicative of the enjoyment and accessibility of the assessment. The strength of the comments also indicates that there were real qualities in the children's approach (e.g. 'fantastic', 'he loved it', 'wonderful'). Despite the fact that many authors of play-based assessment tools make claims about accessibility (e.g. Linder, 1990; Waters, 1999) there has been no previous research on children's approaches. The current findings therefore stand alone in the evaluation of this aspect of validity, and they add support to Waters' comments about her own experiences of the accessibility of Let's Play. They may also add support to her claim that the dynamic, interactive aspects of Let's Play enhance the empowerment of the child as a participant in the assessment situation (Waters & Stringer, 1997). These findings are very encouraging, particularly given the

literature on the difficulties of engaging young children in assessment procedures (Cronbach, 1990; Lidz, 1983; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000) and claims that play-based assessment may be more accessible (Lidz, 2003; Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001). Pellegrini (2001) comments that young children's motivation can impact on both the validity and reliability of pre-school assessment tools and the children's consistently positive approach to Let's Play is therefore likely to have implications for the overall reliability and validity of the tool.

The finding that Let's Play is also a positive experience for parents is important and is a key addition to the literature. Studies to date have focused on the views of other professionals or have focused on parents' views on a particular assessment tool rather than their feelings as participants in the assessment process (e.g. Myers *et al.*, 1996; Smith, *et al.*, 1996). The parents' and children's positive experiences of Let's Play are key to its place in the assessment process. Such positive views may help to minimise the intrusiveness of the test (Wilson, 1998) by making it an enjoyable and positive experience, and this is a key principle of quality assessment (DECP, 1999, Shah *et al.*, 1997). Assessment should be an empowering and positive experience that highlights a child's skills and empowers and guides others to support and develop their areas of difficulty (Barnett *et al.*, 1997; Lauchlan, 2001; Wolfendale, 1997). Assessment that is not enjoyable for the child and reinforces their difficulties will not be helpful in the cycle of assessment and intervention. As one parent in the study commented, 'in assessment you need to point out what they can do – otherwise it's demoralising'.

Assessment should also involve parents as partners in the assessment process (Shah *et al.*, 1997) and several models of play-based assessment mention involving parents as play partners (e.g. Lidz, 2003; Linder, 1990; Mogford-Bevan, 2002; Smith *et al.*, 1996). They do not take this role in Let's Play, but the positive emotions felt by parents indicates that there is potential for them to play a greater part. This may have particular relevance to their potential role as mediators when working dynamically with Guide 3, given the importance of the relationship with the mediator (Waters & Stringer, 1997) and the relatively simple dynamic assessment procedures used in Let's Play, as opposed to some of the more complex, structured models (e.g. Jenson, 2003; Tzuriel, 1997).

Finally, the finding that Let's Play was also a positive and rewarding experience for the assessor is important, given that the EP is an active participant in the assessment process (Newton, 1988). The assessor's perspectives and sense of connectedness (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000) are likely to have important influences on the assessment process, although clearly the study looks at this from the perspective of only one assessor. This aspect of play-based assessment has not previously been investigated but is particularly important because in many of the assessments the assessor plays an important role. In some models, the adult is very much a test administrator and observer (e.g. Belsky & Most, 1981; Coupe & Levy, 1985; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). However, in many others the adult is involved as a play partner (e.g. Lidz, 2003; Linder, 1990; Mogford-Bevan, 2002; Smith *et al.*, 1996) and their engagement and enjoyment would therefore seem to be central to the assessment process and the elicitation of the child's skills. The strong focus on dynamic assessment in Guide 3 of Let's Play and role the assessor takes as mediator

in the element means that, for this particular tool, the positive engagement of the adult is likely to be even more crucial. The current study suggests that Let's Play provides an assessment situation that is conducive to adults taking this interactive, mediating role.

4.1.5. Criterion 5: construct validity

This is a key aspect of the current study, as there has been very little investigation of the construct validity of play-based assessment tools. Only Pellegrini (1987) explores in detail the relationship of real play to a particular (naturalistic) assessment tool and the only mention of this form of evaluation in relation to a semi-structured tool is in the study by Anthony (2003).

A key aspect of construct validity concerns whether the children were genuinely playing in the Let's Play assessment situation. This is a difficult question given the incomplete understanding of the concept of play (Pellegrini, 2001) and the fact that it is socially and culturally construed (Cohen, 1993). In the study, the parents' comments support the notion that the children were playing, although this may have been a reflection of their perceptions of the study rather than an accurate view of the children's behaviour, particularly as the parent leaflet had explained that the study was about assessing through play. Unfortunately, the 'fuzzy' nature of the concept (Garvey, 1991) means that it is not possible to audit the play shown in Let's Play against a universally agreed set of play criteria. It should also be remembered that play may be present in varying degrees depending on the coexistence of various criteria (Smith *et al.*, 1998). For the purposes of this discussion, the observed play

will be considered in relation to Garvey's play characteristics (Garvey, 1991), given that this work is widely referred to in the literature on play-based assessment. Table 5.1. shows a comparison of the play in the assessment in relation to each of Garvey's characteristics. From this table it can be seen that the play behaviour shown in Let's Play reflected many of the characteristics but that there were also some ways in which it differed from spontaneous, unstructured play in real-life situations. For example, it was quite a challenging situation for some children, it could be construed as goal-directed, and it was not truly spontaneous.

It should also be stressed that Let's Play looks at only one type of play – play with objects. Play theorists such as Cohen (1993) see this as a specific and rather constrained aspect of play, rather than as representative of the whole play experience. Let's Play also assumes that certain toys will elicit certain behaviours, but Rubin and Howe (1985) caution that we are not clear about the impact of different toys on the behaviour elicited. Even within the specific area of play with toys, Let's Play focuses only on particular aspects of this play:

Table 5.1. Play shown in Let's Play in relation to the characteristics of play (Garvey, 1991)

<u>Characteristic of play</u> (Garvey, 1991)	<u>Ways in which play in Let's Play is like this characteristic</u>	<u>Ways in which play in Let's Play is not like this characteristic</u>
Pleasurable and enjoyable	The children appeared to enjoy the session and all engaged in the play. Most children needed little encouragement to start playing. Play was generally accompanied by smiles and laughter. Two of the parents commented that their child had been looking forward to the second assessment visit. Most of the children would have played for much longer than it was possible to spend on the assessment.	For some of the children (most notably those with social and communication difficulties) this was clearly quite a challenging situation. Although they did play, they needed some encouragement. They also tended to play for a shorter time than some of the other children.
No extrinsic goal	The play situation was unstructured, with no particular endpoint. It was presented to the children as play rather than having a particular purpose. One of the parents commented that her child thought of the assessor as a friend coming to play rather than as an assessment.	Several of the toys in Let's Play are structured problem-solving toys where there is quite an explicit goal e.g. form board. There clearly was a purpose to the play in the views of the assessor and parent's and it is possible that even young children could have been aware of this, particularly children who had received assessments by other professionals who visited the home.
Spontaneous and voluntary	Let's Play, as used in this study, was very child directed. The children were invited to play rather than instructed. If they decided they did not want to play any longer they were encouraged to return but if the play had reached a natural conclusion the session was ended. Children were also invited to choose items from the play box, rather than being presented with them. If they did not want to play with a particular toy, this was accepted. Every attempt was made to follow children's spontaneous play themes.	Clearly, this is a situation where a stranger arrives with a box of toys, so there is clearly an expectation of play for the child and a situation that artificially prompts it. Play in Let's Play did not arise from spontaneous day-to-day activity. It was fairly spontaneous but within the confines of an orchestrated and confined situation.
Involves active engagement	The children were fully and actively engaged in the play. All explored the toys and physically manipulated them in their play. Care was taken to ensure that the child could direct the play but with encouragement and some direction from the assessor. In this sense the child was a genuine play partner with the adult.	Clearly, this was different to play with a peer because ultimately the adult had control of the situation. There were some toys that some children did not want to play with.
Has systematic relations to what is not play	Difficult to ascertain because the researcher did not have information on other behaviours with which to compare play.	Difficult to ascertain because the researcher does not have behaviours to compare the play session with.

- It uses manufactured toys rather than the full range of everyday objects children use in their play. Both Garvey (1990) and Cohen (1993) stress the focus of the literature on adult designed and purchased toys. The only play-based assessment tool that incorporates natural, everyday objects is Belsky and Most's (1981) model.
- It does not include the wider range of play props that children use in play. Several play-based assessment tools use large play props such as a home corner, sand or dressing up clothes (e.g. Linder, 1990; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).
- It uses toys that the children may not have seen before – at least in terms of the specific examples in the assessment box. Garvey (1990) and Lidz (2003) both describe how children's play with unfamiliar toys will initially focus on exploration and manipulation rather than imaginative play. For this reason, Lidz contrasts play with both familiar and unfamiliar toys in her play-based assessment tool.

The play observed in the Let's Play session gives one sample of play in one specific context. The effect of various contextual factors on play is well established, particularly with regard to environmental setting (Rogers, 1982; Rubin & Howe, 1985) and play partners (Pellegrini, 2001; Rogers, 1982; Smith *et al.*, 1998). In addition, the study indicated that there is a poor association with the ratings of play in Let's Play and everyday situations at preschool. However, a reasonably strong association was found with play in a structured test of play, indicating that the behaviour observed in Let's Play may be more like 'test situation' play than 'real life' play. The play observed in any given situation is likely to result from a complex

interaction between environmental factors including the physical setting, play partners and play-props, and a range of factors relating to the individual child. Therefore, play at home with an unfamiliar adult and a narrow range of toys (as in Let's Play) is unlikely to be representative of the whole range of a child's play across a wide range of situations.

A second key question in relation to construct validity is whether the scores on Let's Play reflect actual play or the scoring framework. Waters (1999) acknowledges that the developmental sequences used in Let's Play have not been standardised but have been arrived at through reviewing and updating existing scales. It is claimed that experience of using Let's Play has confirmed the agreement of these scales with various checklists and standardised tools. However, this may not provide sufficient evidence of the construct validity of the sequences, particularly as many of the scales they have been derived from are based on only experiential and observational evidence (e.g. Sheridan, 1999). As Smith *et al.* (1998) comment, the research on how play develops is unclear and it is also lacking in rigour (Cohen, 1993). It is therefore difficult to know how reflective of play the scales are, particularly as different scales have different elements and degrees of gradation. It is interesting to note that Mogford-Bevan (2002) found different ages levels between her experimentally derived play levels and established developmental scales such as Sheridan's. All of the quantitative measures in the study (inter-rater, test-retest and concurrent) found differences in the level of agreement between different toys and, as mentioned previously, these may be a reflection of the differential sensitivity of the scales for different toys. However, the 'fair' inter-rater reliability of Let's Play indicates that observer bias does not greatly affect the behaviours observed,

indicating that the scores obtained are an accurate reflection of the behaviour shown, even if the scales themselves may have shortcomings.

It is difficult to draw firm conclusions about construct validity, particularly as there is considerable confusion around the concept (Anastasi, 1990). This discussion has attempted to draw together findings across the study to come to a judgement about construct validity, as recommended by Kline (2000). On the basis of this evidence, it can be concluded that Let's Play has a degree of construct validity but that it does not provide a complete assessment and representation of the construct of play.

5.1.6. *The overall reliability and validity of Let's Play*

The design of the study allowed for the collection of a considerable amount of data across the five evaluation criteria. Before the overall pattern of the data is considered, it is important to bear in mind that the study did not cover all the possible aspects of reliability and validity outlined by Anastasi (1990) and Barker *et al.*, (2002). It also looked at evaluation from the perspective of classical test theory (Barker *et al.*, 2002) and did not consider the wider criteria for assessment tools such as those outlined by Wilson (1998). Mogford-Bevan (2002) has commented that evaluations of play-based assessment using measures of reliability and validity may not be totally relevant to this type of tool and may miss the role of more qualitative information gathered in the assessment. Notwithstanding these limitations, the evaluation data does give an initial picture of the overall reliability and validity of Let's Play.

Generally, it appears that Let's Play performs to a 'fair' level across most of the criteria, but with shortcomings in certain areas, most notably the concurrent measures and aspects of construct validity. Its performance across the various criteria assessed in the study is certainly uneven, and it is difficult and probably inappropriate to draw simple conclusions from such a complex pattern of information. Cronbach (1990) stresses that no single test can contain every desirable feature and that improving quality in one area often means sacrificing it in another. It would therefore seem unreasonable to expect Let's Play to perform well on all the evaluation measures included. The study has indicated that Let's Play performs better on measures of reliability rather than on some aspects of validity. Kline (2000) has noted that many psychological tests have problems with validity, so Let's Play is not alone in this respect. The fact that it performs well on some aspects of validity is important because low validity cannot be compensated for by its relatively good performance on measures of reliability (Cronbach, 1990).

Let's Play performed particularly well on the qualitative evaluation measures. The high accessibility and enjoyment are important, as Pellegrini (2001) notes that poor motivation is likely to have implications for the overall reliability and validity of pre-school tools. Face validity is important (Kline 2000) but it alone does not indicate the test is useful (Cronbach, 1990). Therefore, the positive findings on this measure need to be balanced against the measures on the other criteria. Overall, Let's Play's very good performance in relation to the qualitative measures contributes to rather than detracts from the tool's performance on the quantitative measures.

The current study adds to the existing literature on play-based assessment. In particular, it adds to the small amount of evaluation research on test-retest reliability, inter-rater reliability and concurrent validity. It has also collected information on several areas not previously evaluated, e.g. construct validity, concurrent validity in relation to another play-based assessment tool, and accessibility for both children and parents. However, the findings are very specific to one tool and, given the diversity of play-based assessment techniques, care should be taken in generalising the findings to other forms of play-based assessment. The study has gathered a wide range of information on one particular assessment tool, and this allows a picture of reliability and validity to be built up. The only other assessment model that has been evaluated across a range of criteria is TPBA (e.g. Anthony, 2003; Cornett, 1999; Friedli, 1995; Myers *et al.*, 1996). TPBA is a model that reflects the development of play-based assessment in the US (Lidz, 2003) but the current study obtains similar evaluation information for a wider range of criteria for a model developed within the UK context. However, consideration of the overall usefulness of Let's Play also needs to consider some of the wider issues in relation to its use, and these will now be reviewed.

5.1.7. The place of Let's Play in the wider assessment process

Although Let's Play performed reasonably well in relation to the evaluation criteria, this does not guarantee that it will give valid and reliable assessment results, as much will depend upon how it is used within the wider assessment process. As Frederickson and Cline (1999) note, effective assessment includes aspects of both the assessment tool and the assessment process. Good assessment processes promote

problem-solving models (e.g. Monsen *et al.*, 1998), consultative approaches (e.g. Labram, 1992; Wagner, 1995) and dynamic approaches (e.g. Lauchlan, 2001). In relation to pre-school assessment there have been calls for movement away from traditional approaches (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000; Gaussen, 1984) towards assessments that take place within contexts that are collaborative, consultative and broadly based (Barnett *et al.*, 1997; Newton, 1988; Smith & Reynolds, 1998; Wolfendale & Robinson 2001). Let's Play has many features that would locate it within these views of assessment, including the dynamic elements, the meaningful play context and the promotion of child and parental involvement. However, despite these qualities, Let's Play could still be used within a way that does not build on its strengths. Pellegrini (2001) specifically highlights the problems of the misuse of tests with very young children – and Let's Play would not be immune to such concerns.

In addition, the growth of demand for standardised, statutory assessment work by EPs (Boxer *et al.*, 1998; Shah *et al.*, 1997) and the increased push towards the use of psychometric tools (Buck, 1998; Lokke *et al.*, 1997) may encourage EPs to use Guide 1 and neglect Guides 2 and 3. Waters acknowledges this pressure in the manual and says that Guide 1 can be useful for many EP assessments in that it gives developmental levels. However, there is a real danger that the good reliability and validity of Guide 1, combined with the pressure for developmental levels, may lead to Let's Play being used in a very narrow way. In early years assessment, qualitative and functional aspects of assessment are seen as particularly important (Meisels & Atkins Burnett) and there is increasing emphasis on dynamic approaches (Waters, 1999; Sayeed & Guerin, 2000). Arguably, one of the greatest strengths of Let's Play

is the way in which it appears to combine some reasonably robust information on a range of skills (as indicated by this study) alongside more qualitative and dynamic information about children's performance. However, to use only part of Let's Play could represent a misuse of the tool, particularly as the study has shown how much information can be gained from the qualitative measures about the children's approach. There is also evidence that findings gained from dynamic assessment (such as Guide 3) are particularly useful in informing learning and interventions (Elliott & Lauchlan, 1997; Freeman & Millar, 2001; Jensen, 2003).

Cronbach (1990) discusses how early years assessment has moved away from the notion of mental ability, and Wilson (1998) and Meisels & Atkins-Burnett (2000) stress the importance of assessment addressing a range of skills. There may be a danger that Let's Play could be used in a very traditional way, for example by assigning children a developmental level across toys or by ignoring the child's wider skills outside of the play situation. Water's inclusion of the dynamic elements in Guide 3 reflects a focus on the child as 'the person they can become' (Jensen, 2003), rather than static measures of current skills. The study also showed that children's performance across different toys was variable and that they showed a wide range of skills beyond the play categories in Guide 1. The information gathered for each child was complex and multi-faceted and simple summations of scores across the toys would miss many of these key features. There is also a danger that Let's Play could be used in a way that does not normalise the child's skills. Let's Play places early play skills within a continuum of development but could be used inappropriately to describe development in terms of milestones not yet reached, a danger common to many pre-school assessment tools (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000). It would also be inappropriate to use Let's Play to make predications about children's longer-term

development, given that the predictive validity of early years assessment tools tends to be very poor (Anastasi, 1990; Thurman & Widerstrom, 1990; Ulrey & Schnell, 1982; Wilson, 1998).

Another key factor that could impact on the usefulness of Let's Play is how the assessment findings are used to inform action planning. Using assessment findings to make action plans is part of the assessment process (Frederickson & Cameron 1999; Shah *et al.*, 1997), and Wolfendale (1997) stresses importance of taking action as the result of assessments of young children's skills. Dudley (2001) and Linder (1990) both highlight the potential value of play-based assessment in informing interventions. The valid and reliable measures that can be obtained using Let's Play are essential but not sufficient in providing assessment information that is useable, and it is certainly possible to use an effective assessment tool in an appropriate way. Pellegrini (2001) warns of the dangers of using information from pre-school assessments to make what he calls high stakes decisions, and there may be a danger that the good face validity and feelings of enjoyment found for Let's Play may make this more likely by creating a false sense of the validity and reliability of the information gathered.

5.2. Practical implications

The findings from this study inform the ways in which EPs can most appropriately use Let's Play and similar semi-structured play-based assessment tools. However, care should be taken in applying these implications to other play-based tools, as the

generalisability of the findings is not clear, particularly for tools that differ in their degree of structure or focus. The implications will be described in terms of guidance for good practice when using Let's Play. General considerations will be outlined, followed by guidelines for enhancing reliability and validity in practice.

General considerations

- Although Let's Play is an enjoyable, accessible and potentially useful tool it should always be used as part of an appropriate assessment process.
- Careful consideration should always be given as to whether Let's Play is the most appropriate form of assessment tool in relation to the particular assessment questions being asked.
- The information gathered in Let's Play should be used alongside other sources of information about the child's wider skills, including qualitative assessment information.
- Time should be taken to become familiar with the child's situation and their particular play contexts and experiences before conducting the assessment (as the child's play in the assessment may be very different).
- Users should be aware of the effect of their own biases in the observation and interpretation of play behaviour.
- Care should be taken in using and interpreting the assessment findings, particularly in terms of predicting future performance, identifying skills not yet attained or obtaining general developmental levels.
- It may be unhelpful to rely solely on the developmental play levels in Guide 1. The qualitative information gathered through Guide 2 is very informative

and the dynamic elements in Guide 3 has the potential to add greatly to the information in Guide 1.

Test-retest reliability

- A child's performance on Let's Play in one session may not be indicative of their performance on another, particularly for some children and possibly for imaginatively based toys.
- It is important to spend time with the child before the assessment in order to build confidence, rapport and familiarity.
- It may be inappropriate to conduct an assessment on the first meeting with a child and more valid information about the child's interaction and social skills may be gained during a second session. It may therefore be more appropriate to carry out the dynamic and interactive assessment elements during a second visit.

Inter-rater reliability

- Users should be aware that when acting as a participant assessor, observations of behaviours on some toys may be missed.
- Users should also be aware that it may be more difficult to accurately observe and record the play of those children with more developmentally advanced play skills.

Concurrent validity

- It is inappropriate to assume that play shown in Let's Play is indicative of play in pre-school. Users should be aware that for some children and some

toys there may be a very significant difference in their play in pre-school, particularly for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

- It may be helpful to conduct the assessment in different settings.
- Separate direct observations of play in pre-school may be helpful to give a more realistic and broad picture of a child's play skills. Failing this, information from key adults about the child's play in everyday situations will help to identify the range of typical play behaviours.

Face validity/taker rapport

- It may be helpful to involve parents more fully in the assessment, possibly as play partners.
- Assessors should seek feedback from parents on their child's approach, as this can be very positive and affirming and can help to embed the child's skills within the context of their usual play.

Construct validity

- It may be helpful to use a wider selection of toys, including objects that are not specifically toys (i.e. everyday objects).
- It is important that assessors remember that although the behaviour in Let's Play may look like play, it is narrower and more controlled than the range of real life play experiences. Although it can be loosely termed play, it may be more accurately described as an aspect of play-like assessment behaviour. Therefore, it is important not to draw conclusions about children's overall play skills on the basis of their play in the assessment situation.

In drawing out the practice implications from the findings of the study, it is important to stress that no test is useful if it is not used within an appropriate and helpful assessment process in which attempts are taken to reduce bias and to use assessment findings appropriately. Additionally, users of Let's Play should be aware of its strengths and weaknesses and consider these in relation to the purpose of any particular assessment before deciding whether it is the most appropriate tool to use.

5.3. Strengths and limitations of the study

5.3.1. *Strengths*

The study makes a contribution to the existing evaluation literature on play-based assessment in two key ways. Firstly, it focuses on a tool developed for use by EPs within the UK context - an area that has received very little attention in the evaluation literature to date, with the exception of the small amount of work by Sayeed and Guerin (2000) and Mogford-Bevan (2002). Secondly, it examines the particular assessment tool according to several criteria, whereas existing studies have focused on only one or two aspects (e.g. Dudley, 2001; Cornett, 1999; Friedli, 1995; Myers *et al.*, 1996; Sayeed & Guerin, 2000; Smith *et al.*, 1996). The way that the study builds up a picture of reliability and validity across several areas is important because evaluation information across several criteria is necessary before judgements can be made about an assessment tool's usefulness. The fact that the information on the various criteria was collected for the same sample of children across the same time period also facilitates comparisons across the whole range of evaluation information gathered.

Another area of strength relates to the way the study was embedded within everyday EP practice. It therefore looks at Let's Play within the real-life contexts in which it is used, including current models of EP practice and the Code of Practice procedures. Another important factor is that, unlike some other evaluation studies (e.g. Anthony, 2003; Farmer-Dougan & Kaszuba, 1999; Friedli, 1995), it uses a sample of children for whom EP involvement had been requested, rather than a sample gathered solely for research purposes. The use of the real-life context and sample enhances the validity of the data collected and increases its generalisability to EP practice.

5.3.2. Limitations of the study

The main limitation of this study relates directly to one of its key strengths. As the study attempted to gain an overall picture of validity and reliability, it was only possible to 'brush the surface' of each of the chosen criteria. As mentioned previously, many of the previous evaluations of play-based assessment have focused on fewer criteria and have been able to investigate them in more detail. In this study, each criterion measure was examined from a particular viewpoint and there are many ways in which each criterion could be investigated further. For example, concurrent validity could be examined with respect to standardised cognitive tools, and face validity could be studied with respect to professionals' views. This limitation was unavoidable, given that the study aimed to gain a broad picture of several criteria, but it does highlight the need for more detailed follow-up studies to examine particular areas. It should also be remembered that although the study looked at several criteria, it did not include all the possible evaluation dimensions.

Another key limitation is the size and nature of the sample of children. The small sample and the fact that it was drawn from one geographical area means that the findings may not generalise to different populations. Other evaluation studies have used larger samples of children (e.g. Myers *et al.*, 1996) and children from a range of ethnic groups (e.g. Farmer-Dougan & Kaszuba, 1999), and although the sample contained children of different ages and different needs it did not contain a sufficiently large or diverse set of children to allow conclusions to be drawn about the reliability and validity of Let's Play more generally. Further evaluations are needed with larger samples and more socially and ethnically diverse populations of children, particularly given the evidence on the cultural constructions of play (Curtis, 1994; Richman & Dawe, 1988; Rogers, 1982) and the importance of the ethnicity of standardisation samples for pre-school assessment tools (Wilson, 1998). It would also be interesting to look at the reliability and validity of Let's Play for specific groups of children (e.g. children with autism or children with severe and complex needs) as there is evidence that the play of children with different needs is qualitatively different (Linder, 1990; Sayeed & Guerin, 2000) and that there may be social barriers to their play development (Dickens & Denziloe, 1999).

The potential for researcher bias is a thread that runs through most of this study. Although measures were taken to attempt to minimise this (e.g. protocols and standard letters) the researcher was very much part of the study and could well have influenced the outcomes. This was not only true for their role as researcher (administering the structured questionnaire to parents, conducting preschool interviews, etc) but also because the researcher was part of the assessment process in their role as assessor. In this role, a number of biases could have been operating –

such as biases in interpreting the children's play, in conveying attitudes towards each assessment tool, and promoting and encouraging the play of individual children. An improvement to the study could have been to split the assessor and researcher roles between different people (as in the studies reported by Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990, where research students were used to carry out play observations). However, it should be noted that EP assessment is by nature a participatory process (Newton, 1988) and the biases and perceptions of the assessor are likely to play a part in the use of Let's Play.

As this study was conducted within the constraints of real working situations and looked at several evaluation measures simultaneously, it was not possible to control factors in the way that might have been possible for a more academic study. This meant that although the study reflected some of the real-life constraints that may have been operating, it did not control variables in the ways that would have been most desirable. These issues have been reviewed in the previous discussion of the findings in relation to each criterion, but include factors such as

- maintaining a more consistent test-retest interval;
- maintaining consistency between the test-retest situations;
- using consistent raters to facilitate comparisons across assessments;
- controlling intervening variables across the pre-school and Let's Play situations;
- using a wider range of concurrent measures, including comparisons with traditional assessment tools; and
- gaining the views of a wider range of people on face validity.

Future, more focused, evaluation studies may be able to address the control of these factors more closely.

The study looked at only certain aspects of Let's Play (all of Guide 1 and parts of Guide 2), rather than at the assessment tool as a whole. In addition, it did not include all the toys listed in Guide 1, and although Let's Play is designed to be used with various toys, the exclusion of the bricks and picture lotto may have excluded important information, particularly as the lotto is the only collaborative game in the assessment. The fact that the study did not look at the dynamic assessment elements in Guide 3 is important. Dynamic elements have been identified as key features of quality EP assessment (Elliott & Lauchlan, 2000; Shah *et al.*, 1997), have increasing importance in early years assessment (Sayeed & Guerin, 2000; Tzuriel, 1997) and are seen as a key aspect of Let's Play (Waters & Stringer, 1997). There are also particular issues relating to the lack of evaluations of dynamic assessment tools (Deutsch & Reynolds, 2000; Guthke *et al.*, 1997; Tzuriel 1997) and therefore future evaluations of Guide 3 will be important. Also, as Jensen (2003) comments, it is unclear how relevant the concepts of reliability and validity are to dynamic tools, as the key dynamic questions do not relate to validating the measures of the child but rather to notions of learning potential and the mechanisms to identify these (Elliott & Lauchlan, 1997). Concepts such as test-retest reliability will have little relevance to Guide 3 (as the aim is to change the child's skills over time) but concepts of validity are central to dynamic assessment tools (Tzuriel, 1997). Therefore, although some of the validity findings of the current study may have relevance for Guide 3, a different evaluation framework may be more appropriate for future evaluations of this aspect

of Let's Play. Water and Stringer (1997) have examined some of the qualitative features of the dynamic elements of an earlier version of Let's Play and Waters (1999) comments that further work is underway to develop this element of the tool. Evaluation of Guide 3 will be an important addition to the findings of the current study and will help to provide an overall picture of the usefulness of the tool.

Finally, the fact the study focused on a single assessment tool as used by a single EP means that care needs to be taken when generalising the findings to play-based assessments overall. As was noted in Chapter 1, play-based assessment tools vary considerably in their degree of structure and in terms of variables such as the role of the assessor, the range of skills assessed, multi-professional aspects and the way play information is recorded and used. Until the impact of different forms of play-based assessment on validity and reliability is clearer, it is difficult to know to what extent these findings can be extended to other tools. Certainly, some tools are similar to Let's Play (e.g. Sayeed & Guerin, 2000) but others differ in many respects (e.g. Linder, 1990; Mogford-Bevan, 2002).

5.4. Future research

As mentioned previously, a key area for future research would be to further evaluate Let's Play in relation to each of the evaluation criteria in greater detail, with appropriate adaptations to methodology, as outlined in the previous section. This would help to gain more robust data in each area and would allow the direct comparison of other studies with this evaluation. Currently, these findings do rather

stand alone and it will be important to more fully evaluate Let's Play in the future, possibly using a wider range of evaluation criteria. In particular, it would also be helpful to carry out future evaluations with a wider, more representative sample of children and with a wider sample of assessors. The current findings are very embedded in the practice of one EP working in one EP service.

As there have been so few evaluations of UK based semi-structured tools, it would be beneficial to carry out studies of tools that are closely related to Let's Play, such as the model developed by Sayeed and Guerin (2000). Comparison of findings between the two models could be very informative and help to guide the practice of EPs in the UK.

Finally, there is a need for research that takes a much broader view of the use of Let's Play. This could include evaluations of the use of qualitative information and the dynamic aspects of the tool (Guide 3). It is also important to investigate the ways in which Let's Play is used within the wider assessment process. Crucially, research is needed on how the findings of Let's Play are used to inform interventions and support within EP practice. It is also important to consider how Let's Play is used alongside other assessment approaches (e.g. interviews, observations) in order to gain an overall picture of a child's strengths and difficulties.

5.5. Concluding comments

As Cronbach (1990) notes, there is no simple answer to the question of what is the best test for a certain purpose as no test can include all the desirable features and different tests will be used for different purposes. The current study has enabled a rich pattern of data to be collected across the various evaluation criteria and the complexity of this information reflects the complexity of the question as to whether or not Let's Play is a useful assessment tool. The limitations of the current study have been acknowledged, and in many ways it provides a starting point for fuller evaluations of Let's Play. However, the study indicates that Let's Play has many desirable features and that it can address some of the recognised challenges of pre-school assessment. It performed to a 'fair' level on measures of reliability and in relation to some aspects of validity. It also performed well on qualitative aspects of test evaluation, including accessibility, enjoyment and face validity. Nevertheless, Let's Play needs to be used with caution and with an awareness of its potential shortcomings, most notably the apparent lack of concurrent validity with everyday play and the fact that it appears to sample a very restricted repertoire of play. It is also important to be aware that when EPs use Let's Play, its good face validity and user enjoyment/accessibility may mask shortcomings in other areas and give a misleading impression of its usefulness in EP practice.

There is no simple answer to the question 'Is Let's Play a useful assessment tool for EPs?' - the decision to use the tool will need to be made with an awareness of its strengths and limitations in mind. EPs should also make reference to the particular purpose of the assessment and the wider assessment process within which Let's Play is used. Although it has considerable strengths, Let's Play will only be as effective

and useful as the assessment process within which it is embedded. Finally, the decision to carry out an individual assessment using Let's Play needs to be made within the context of recent developments in the role of EPs working in the Early Years. These roles focus more on strategic and setting-level work, and interventions at these levels may ultimately prove more effective in bringing about change than individual assessments of children's needs.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Toys used in Let's Play

Toy	Abbreviation used in this report
Symbolic play- large toys	large
Symbolic play - miniatures	min
Lock-a-block shape sorter	lock
Six piece form board	form
Picture lotto	lotto
Fifteen ball abacus	abacus
Crayons, paper, scissors	cray
Bricks	brick
Shapes and sorting tray	shape
Nesting beakers	beak
Ball	ball
Book	book

Appendix 2: Guidelines for conducting a Let's Play Assessment

(from Waters, 1999)

1: Planning the assessment

Talk to people who know the child/observe the child (at home or pre-school)

The assessment can take place at home, in pre-school or in the centre setting

The parent should always be present, except when this would be counterproductive

2: Assessment

Start with the easier toys and build the child's confidence

Give 'low level' prompts at this stage eg "what can we do with this?"

Continue to present toys or allow the child to make choices

Continue assessment with the aims of encouraging the child to spontaneously explore toys and accept the involvement of the assessor.

If the child is reluctant, the assessor can encourage by modeling, inviting child to have a turn, using praise, involving carers etc

3. Observation

Encourage the child to play and then observe their behaviours – use this to inform the completion of Guide 1 and to gain some qualitative information (Guide 2)

4. Mediation

Once the child has shown an ability to share play and tolerate the assessor's interaction, investigate how play can be developed and extended (Guide 3)

5. Ending the session

The session usually lasts 45 minutes - 1 hour

End with a quiet activity to signal the end of the session

Appendix 3: Joint Agreement for Educational Psychology Involvement Form

TO BE COMPLETED BY SCHOOL

SURNAME:		FORENAMES:		DOB:	
GENDER: Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/>		IS CHILD IN PUBLIC CARE? YES/NO			
PARENT/CARER DETAILS:			PARENT/CARER DETAILS:		
TITLE SURNAME			TITLESURNAME		
ADDRESS			ADDRESS		
.....				
.....				
POST CODE			POST CODE		
TEL NO:			TEL NO:		
RELATIONSHIP TO CHILD			RELATIONSHIP TO CHILD		
RESIDENCE OF CHILD? YES/NO			RESIDENCE OF CHILD? YES/NO		
PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY? YES/NO:			<u>PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY? YES/NO</u>		
ETHNIC ORIGIN					
<input type="checkbox"/> White-British	<input type="checkbox"/> Mixed - White & Black Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian/Asian British-Indian	<input type="checkbox"/> Black/Black British-Caribbean		
<input type="checkbox"/> White-Irish	<input type="checkbox"/> Mixed - White & Black African	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian/Asian British-Pakistani	<input type="checkbox"/> Black/Black British-African		
<input type="checkbox"/> White-Traveller (Irish)	<input type="checkbox"/> Mixed - White & Asian	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian/Asian British-Bangladeshi	<input type="checkbox"/> Black/Black British-Other		
<input type="checkbox"/> White-Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Mixed - Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian/Asian British-Other			
<input type="checkbox"/> White-Gypsy/Roma					
<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/> Any Other Ethnic Group	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent/Pupil preferred not to say	<input type="checkbox"/> Information not obtained		
HOME LANGUAGE:					
PRESENT SCHOOL:			DATE OF ENTRY:		
PREVIOUS SCHOOLS (with dates):					
COP LEVEL:	NC YEAR:	UPN:			
PLEASE ATTACH THE FOLLOWING		<input type="checkbox"/> National Curriculum levels <input type="checkbox"/> IEPs and Reviews; PSPs (if relevant) <input type="checkbox"/> Details of involvement with other agencies <input type="checkbox"/> PEP (if the pupil is in public care)			

TO BE COMPLETED BY THE EP

PUPIL WAS DISCUSSED WITH: (Educational Psychologist)
ON (date)

AGREED PURPOSE AND NATURE OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST INVOLVEMENT (INCLUDING DESIRED OUTCOMES WHERE APPROPRIATE): (To be completed by the Educational Psychologist)

Educational Psychologist's signature

Requested By:

- ☐ School
☐ Parent
☐ Other LEA Service

Reason for Involvement:

- ☐ Communication & interaction
☐ Cognition & learning
☐ Behaviour, emotional & Social development
☐ Sensory and/or physical

TO BE COMPLETED BY PARENT(S)/CARERS

PLEASE USE THIS SPACE TO WRITE ANY COMMENTS YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE

I give my permission for the Educational Psychologist to become involved with my child.

Parent/Guardian Signature: Date:

Please note: On receipt of this form the Educational Psychology Service will open a pupil file. The information held in this file will be maintained according to the requirements of the Data Protection Act (further details available from the Service)

Headteacher/SENCo Signature: Date:

School to return completed form to:

Educational Psychology Service
.....
.....

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

First Follow up Date File Opened on D/b
First Recorded Date(date form rec'd) D/b Record entered by

Appendix 4: Parent letter – pilot study

ASSESSING YOUNG CHILDREN'S SKILLS THROUGH THEIR PLAY

Dear Parent

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research study.

The study is part of my doctorate research at University College London. It looks at how Educational Psychologists can assess young children's learning by observing their play.

The children taking part in the study have all received support from the Pre-School Teacher Service. Play-based assessment is often used as a way of finding out about a young child's skills before they start school and I will be able to give you feedback on your child's play at the end of the visits. This is also a helpful way for me to informally get to know your child before they start school.

I will need to visit you twice and carry out two play-based assessment sessions with your child. The pre-school teacher will video the first of these sessions, so that we have a record of the play. During my second visit I will also use some other assessment techniques, which I will show you and explain to you at the time. With your agreement, I would also like to contact your child's pre-school so that we can gather some information on their play in that setting.

All the information collected in the study will be confidential. Names will not be used in any research that is published and individual children will not be identifiable.

If at any stage you wish to withdraw from the study, please let me know and I will ensure that any information relating to your child is withdrawn from the research records.

I would be very happy to provide you with further information about the study, if you would be interested in this.

If you have any further questions, please feel free to ask these at any point during the visits, or contact me at the following address.

Educational Psychology Service

.....

.....

.....

Thank you once again for your help, it is very much appreciated.

Helen Squibb, Senior Educational Psychologist

Appendix 5: Pre-school letter – pilot study

Dear

RE X

As you may be aware, I have recently taken over work as the Educational Psychologist in the local area.

As part of my work, I am visiting a number of pre-school children in the area, along with Anna Brooke, Pre-School Teacher Counsellor. This will help me to get to know the children before they start school. For some of the children, I may also visit them in pre-school.

I have a particular interest in pre-school work and I am currently studying for a doctorate at University College London. My doctorate looks at how Educational Psychologists can assess young children's learning by observing their play.

As part of my study I am looking at how children's play in an assessment situation at home with an Educational Psychologist compares with the skills they show in pre-school.

I have already carried out a play-based assessment session at home with X. Parents have given me permission to contact you.

I would like to ask you to complete the attached schedule of skills for X so that I can also compare **his/her** skills in the assessment situation with those you see in pre-school.

I very much appreciate your help in this study. The information you give me will not only be useful in the study, it will also help me to get to know X better.

If you have any queries or would like to know more about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at the above address.

Thank you once again for your help.

Helen Squibb
Senior Educational Psychologist

cc Parents
Pre-School Teacher
SAE

Appendix 6: Let's Play front sheet – EP version

'LET'S PLAY' RECORD SHEETS

Participant.....

Date of play session.....

Completed by.....

Date completed

Dear EP

Thank you for agreeing to help with my study.

The study involves an evaluation of the Let's Play assessment technique for young children (Waters, 1999). This particular part of the study looks at inter-rater reliability for the observations made during play sessions.

You will have been given a video of a play-based assessment session conducted using the procedures and toys suggested in the Let's Play manual. You and another EP will be asked 'score' the child's performance using the Let's Play record sheet. The two sets of 'scores' will then be compared to gain a measure of the consistency between different observers.

- Please watch the video only once (as this is more reflective of a typical 'live' assessment situation).
- Record only the skills that the child is able to do independently.
- The record sheets can be completed during and/or after watching the video
- Please complete the record sheets as fully as you can. However, it is important to record only behaviours that you have observed in the video.

Once you and another EP have completed your record sheets I will be able to give you feedback on how they compared, if you would be interested in this.

Thank you once again, your help is very much appreciated.

Helen

Waters, J. (1999) *Let's Play: An Interactive Assessment with Young Children*, Newcastle upon Tyne LEA.

Appendix 7: Let's Play front sheet – pre-school version

'LET'S PLAY' RECORD SHEETS

Participant.....

Date of play session.....

Completed by.....

Date completed

Dear Pre-school

Thank you for helping with my study.

As explained in my covering letter I have already carried out an assessment session with all the children in the study and obtained permission from their parents to contact their pre-schools.

The study involves an evaluation of the 'Let's Play' assessment technique for young children. This particular part of the study looks at how the child's play during the assessment session compares with the play skills they show in pre-school.

Attached to this sheet is a list of the skills used in the 'Lets Play' assessment record. Please fill in these sheets using your knowledge of the child. This will then be compared with the skills the child showed during the assessment session to see whether the assessment gave a good indication of their usual skills.

I will be sharing the findings with parents, so they will also see a copy of your completed form

- Please complete the record sheets as fully as you can
- Tick only behaviours that you or others pre-school have actually seen the child do
- You can tick behaviours that you have seen at any time, even if it was a long time ago, and in any situation within the pre-school

Could you please return the completed form in the attached envelope.

Thank you once again, your help is very much appreciated.

Helen Squibb
Senior Educational Psychologist

Appendix 8: Let's Play front sheet – parent version

'LET'S PLAY' RECORD SHEETS

Participant.....

Date of play session.....

Completed by.....

Date completed

Dear Parent

Thank you for offering to help with my study.

The study involves an evaluation of the 'Let's Play' assessment technique for young children. This particular part of the study looks at how your child's play during the assessment session compares with the play skills they show in normal activities at home.

Attached to this sheet is a list of the skills used in the 'Let's Play' assessment record. Please fill in these sheets using your knowledge of your child. This will then be compared with the skills your child showed during the assessment session to see whether the assessment gave a good measure of their skills.

- Please complete the record sheets as fully as you can
- Tick only behaviours that you or others in the family have actually seen your child do
- You can tick behaviours that you have seen at any time, even if it was a long time ago, and in any situation eg at home, on holiday, with friends, at the shops.

I will collect your completed record sheet when I next visit.

Thank you once again, your help is very much appreciated.

Helen Squibb
Senior Educational Psychologist

Appendix 9: Let's Play record sheets – symbolic play and form board

SYMBOLIC PLAY – Large toys (teddy, doll, tea pot, cups, spoons, plates, play food, telephone, pillow, blanket, bath, soap, toothbrush, sponge, brush etc.)

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Age Norm</i>	✓ or ✗	<i>Comments</i>
Names teddy or other items (with some encouragement)	12 – 18 m		
Applies toys to self (e.g. “sleeps” on pillow, brushes own hair)	13 – 15 m		
Relates toys to each other briefly (e.g. stirs spoon in cup)	13 – 15 m		
Indicates body part on teddy/doll when named	18 m – 2 yrs		
Shows awareness of function of toys by relating them to each other (e.g. pours tea from pot)	18 m – 2 yrs		
Applies toys to others e.g. offers tea to mum	2 yrs		
Performs single actions of pretend play (e.g. feeds teddy, brushes hair of doll)	2 yrs		
Performs a related sequence of actions (e.g. brushes doll's teeth, then puts to bed)	2.5 yrs		
Comments on what teddy/doll is going to do next	3 yrs		
Completes a whole process (e.g. making tea from beginning to end)	4 yrs		

SIX PIECE FORM BOARD

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Age Norm</i>	✓ or ✗	<i>Comments</i>
Inserts circle correctly	18 m – 2 yrs		
Inserts three shapes correctly	2 – 2.5 yrs		
Inserts six shapes correctly (over one minute)	2.5- 3 yrs		
Inserts six shapes correctly (in one minute)	3 yrs +		
Names Shapes: square, triangle, circle	4 yrs		

Appendix 10: Let's Play developmental age conversions

Let's Play category	Conversion to approximate age (months)
pre 12m	9
12m	12
18m	18
12 - 18m	15
13 - 15m	14
under 18m	15
18m - 2 yrs	21
under 2 yrs	21
2 yrs	24
2 - 2.5 yrs	27
under 2.5 yrs	27
2.5 yrs	30
2.5 - 3 yrs	33
3 yrs	36
3 yrs +	39
3 - 3.5 yrs	39
3.5 yrs	42
3.5 yrs +	45
3.5 - 4 yrs	45
4yrs	48
4 yrs +	51
4 - 4.5 yrs	51
4.5 yrs	54
5 yrs	60
5 yrs +	63

Appendix 11: Information leaflet for parents

STUDY: ASSESSING YOUNG CHILDREN'S SKILLS THROUGH THEIR PLAY

Information for parents

Why is play-based assessment important?

Play is often used as a way of assessing young children's skills in different areas of their development. By observing children's play, information can be gathered on areas such as physical skills, cooperation skills, learning skills and problem-solving skills.

Educational Psychologists often use play-based assessment in their day-to-day work with pre-school children. This will usually involve carrying out a play session with the child at home. Information from the play session is then used alongside information from other sources (eg discussions with parents and observations of the child in the pre-school setting) to build a picture of the child's strengths and difficulties.

What is the study about?

This study looks at whether play-based assessment is a good way for Educational Psychologists to assess young children's skills. It is part of a doctorate course at University College London and involves children who have been 'referred' to the Educational Psychology Service.

Although play-based assessment has become very popular, there has been very little research into whether it is actually a good way of assessing children's skills.

The study looks at these questions:

- Does the assessment give the same information on two different play sessions?
- Does it give similar information to other 'tried and tested' assessment tools?
- How does it link with the play the child shows in their pre-school setting?
- Do two people observing the same assessment assess the child's play in the same way?
- Do parents find it useful and 'user friendly'?

What will the study involve?

The study is very similar to the normal assessments an Educational Psychologist would carry out. The only difference is that the assessments are carried out in a more detailed way and over several visits.

For those children involved in the study several activities take place:

- A first home visit where the study is discussed and a play-based assessment session is videoed
- A second home visit where the same play-based assessment is repeated
- A third home visit where a more formal assessment of the child's play is carried out. At this visit, the assessment findings will also be discussed and parents will have a chance to say how they found the assessments.
- A visit is also made to the child's pre-school setting to talk to pre-school staff about their play in the pre-school.
- The videoed session is later watched and assessed by another Educational Psychologist.

Do I have to take part?

There is no pressure for parents to involve their children in the study. 'Normal' Educational Psychology involvement can take place without children being involved. Parental consent is always required before the study begins and I will give further details and answer any questions before beginning any work with your child.

What will happen next?

If you do decide you would like to take part, your Educational Psychologist and I will arrange to visit you at home to carry out the first assessment session. I will give you more details about the study at that time and would be very happy to answer any questions you may have.

Helen Squibb
Senior Educational Psychologist, Children's Services, XX County Council

Appendix 12: Protocol for initial discussion with parents

INTRODUCTION PROTOCOL

- Introduce self and role
- Go through parent leaflet (parents should have already – if not give copy)
- Go through parent letter
- Any questions?

Start of play-based assessment

- Assessing the tool – to see how useful it is with a range of children
- It will also give us information about your child's skills and difficulties
- No right or wrong response – however your child responds is fine
- Outline each person's role

Reminders

- ☀ Make date for next visit
- ☀ Consent to contact and visit pre-school

Appendix 13: Letter to parents – main study

ASSESSING YOUNG CHILDREN'S SKILLS THROUGH THEIR PLAY

Dear Parent

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research study.

The study is part of my doctorate research at University College London. It looks at how Educational Psychologists can assess young children's learning by observing their play.

For all the children taking part in the study, a request has been made for Educational Psychology involvement. Play-based assessment is often used by Educational Psychologists as a way of finding out about a young child's skills before they start school, and the assessments carried out in the study will be the same as those normally carried out as part of the work of the Educational Psychologist. As part of the study, I will be able to give you feedback on your child's play at the end of the visits.

I will need to visit you three times and carry out three play-based assessment sessions with your child. Your link Educational Psychologist will video the first of these sessions, so that we have a record of the play. During my third visit I will also use some other assessment techniques, which I will show you and explain to you at the time. With your agreement, I would also like to contact your child's pre-school so that we can gather some information about their play in that setting.

Your views as parents are also very important in the study, and on my last visit I would also like to talk to you about your views of the assessments.

All the information collected in the study will be confidential. Names will not be used in any research that is published and individual children will not be identifiable. The information collected in the study will be stored in line with the procedures of the Educational Psychology Service, and in accordance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act.

If at any stage you wish to withdraw from the study, please let me know and I will ensure that any information relating to your child is withdrawn from the research records.

I would be very happy to provide you with further information about the study, if you would be interested in this.

If you have any further questions, please feel free to ask these at any point during the visits, or contact me at the following address.

Educational Psychology Service

.....
.....

Thank you once again for your help - it is very much appreciated.

Appendix 14: Information for pre-schools – main study

PLAY-BASED ASSESSMENT: INFORMATION FOR PRE-SCHOOL STAFF

Thank you for helping with my study. I have a particular interest in pre-school work and am currently studying for a doctorate at University College London. My doctorate looks at how Educational Psychologists can assess young children's learning by observing their play in a structured situation.

As I explained, I have already carried out an assessment session with all the children in the study and obtained permission from their parents to contact their pre-schools.

The study involves an evaluation of the 'Let's Play' assessment technique for young children. This particular part of the study looks at how the child's play during the assessment session compares with the play skills they show in pre-school.

We will be using a list of the skills used in the 'Let's Play' assessment record to gain a picture of the skills that, from your knowledge and experience, the child normally shows in pre-school.

This will then be compared with the skills the child showed during the assessment session, to see whether the assessment gave a good indication of their usual skills.

I will be sharing all the findings with parents once the assessments are complete.

When we complete the record sheets:

- Please complete the record sheets as fully as you can
- Tick only behaviours that you or others in the pre-school have actually seen the child do
- You can tick behaviours that you have seen at any time, even if it was a long time ago, and in any situation within the pre-school

Thank you once again; your help is very much appreciated.

Helen Squibb
Senior Educational Psychologist

Educational Psychology Service

.....

Appendix 15: Interactive Factors Framework recording sheet

Name.....		Dates of visits.....	
Environmental	Biological	Management	
	Cognitive		
	Behavioural		

Appendix 16: Parental interview schedule

Name of child..... Date.....

1. You have seen two assessment tools used as part of the study (two play-based sessions and the Symbolic Play Test).

In what other situations have you observed your child being assessed? (if any)

Prompt: type of test, professional, setting, by whom.

2. Thinking about the two play-based assessment sessions – how do you feel your child responded to these?

3. How did you feel when watching the play-based sessions/afterwards?

Prompt: compared to other assessments

4. From your perspective as a parent, what do you think are main strengths of play-based assessment?

Prompt: compared to other assessments

5. From your perspective as a parent, what do you think are the main disadvantages?

Prompt: compared to other assessments

What would help to overcome these?

6. Are there any other comments you would like to make?

Show card:

Health Visitor

Speech and language Therapist

Clinical Psychologist

Paediatrician

Occupational Therapist

Physiotherapist

Specialist Teacher (HI/VI/PD etc)

HEPAC

Appendix 17: Summary of comments relating to children's approaches

Child 1
<i>Lets Play session 1</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enthusiastic and sociable boy • Much more settled in the play situation than just before it <i>Let's Play session 2</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Much more settled today. • Focused

Child 2
<i>Lets Play session 1</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good approach to toys she's familiar with – other toys seem to 'throw' her • Needs safe, familiar activities with very small element of challenge? • Great for 10-15 minutes – then sudden change – reluctant to attempt anything else. • Her comfort toy calms her <i>Let's Play session 2</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greets me positively • Seems more interactive • After she has got upset its difficult to get her to refocus <i>Other comments</i> Mo: she has been very unsettled before the first assessment session + is tired that day.

Child 3
<i>Lets Play session 1</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very inquisitive – a learner – investigates the toys • Has goals for what he's doing • Gets all toys out at start <i>Let's Play session 2</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good memory – tells me which toys we did last time – asks for the stairs in the house • More settled – plays with toys in turn • Very focused – each toy at a time – does he need time to explore the toys before he plays with them more fully? • Sociable – likes to share a story – he really 'shares' the session – "Can we read a story?"

Child 4

Lets Play session 1

- Very inquisitive
- Very socially aware
- Follows guidance and demonstration well – tries and if can't do, offers me the object. If I point, she follows
- Claps when she has achieved goal
- Gets attention using point and vocalisations

Let's Play session 2

- Much more interactive with me
- Really happy
- Brings me toys. Brings me her flap book after we've shared mine
- Seeks my eye contact- puts her face in my line of vision
- Lots of smiles, facial gestures etc

Other comments

- Mo: she needs to know that I'm not going to prod her like a doctor

Child 5

Lets Play session 1

- Needs skilful persuasion – needs all my focus to engage him
- Problem solving skills are good – symbolic play seems less developed?
- Does follow his own agenda in the assessment – likes some toys and not others
- Takes some persuading but once settled concentration and skills are good
- Some toys- will not do
- Some good social skills once settled – language OK
- When completes a task – jumps. Can do suddenly once excited – loud, jumps around, dances.

Let's Play session 2

- Lots more social interaction and eye contact
- More relaxed with me?
- Less interested in the toys but does engage
- I feel he may be able to do more with the symbolic play than he's motivated to do with these miniatures

Other comments

Mo: on my second visit mo says he has been looking forward to my visit. Dad in hospital today - and mo reports this is unsettling him because he hasn't seen dad.

EP reports concerns about his communication – wouldn't talk to her when she played with him at pre-school

Child 6

Lets Play session 1

- Puzzle skills are good.
- Likes and is good at symbolic play
- Really good play skills
- Concentration and social play are very good
- He enjoys it
- Hesitant to begin with (whispers) –but confidence soon grows.
- More directive as session goes on

Let's Play session 2

- quick on beakers and form board
- remembers from last time – eg knows two people are missing – asks for them
- Positive reaction to me – quickly confident this time
- Some good language – 2-3 word sentences and some longer. Confident in use of language
- Very sociable – wants me to join in – gives me paper, abacus balls etc
- Organised
- Quite directive but also shares
- Very positive, very engaged
- Loves drawing

Child 7

Lets Play session 1

- Visual problem solving skills seem very good
- Concentrates quite well when it's his own choosing
- Some toys – not interested – goes away
- Socially, very independent
- Eye contact very low
- Only on one toy does he really interact with me – but happy for me to be alongside
- No 'chat' alongside play
- Responds best to very clear instructions and questions

Let's Play session 2

- Sits with back to me – but OK for me to come alongside – then involves me, brushes my hair etc (no prompting)
- Still very quiet – names items in play house
- Some eye contact
- Makes me 'tea' when I ask
- On second visit much more responsive to me.

Child 8

Lets Play session 1

- Cognitive skills seem fine
- Socially, very good. Friendly
- Short time on each toy – clear that he's 'finished' – but good attention when he's actually playing with the toy

Let's Play session 2

- Symbolic play – shows more extended sequences on second visit
- Very friendly
- Slightly less time on toys – but very keen to play

Other comments

Mo reports he's looked forward to my second visit.

Child 9

Lets Play session 1

- Play and learning skills are good. Puzzles –good
- Responds to prompts and scaffolding – you can see the development of his skills
- Very confident and interested
- Very good concentration
- Accessed the toys despite visual difficulties
- Sociable boy – likes shared activities
- Very, very responsive and involved

Let's Play session 2

- In play – just need to give him one prompt and he can do eg show person on bed and he copies and says "night night"
- Once again, very interested and keen to play
- Loves the social aspects of the play situation – lots of eye contact and initiation of social contact eg giving me play food
- Single words alongside play
- Concentration is very good
- With more complex formboard, throws pieces aside – but copes well with the challenge of something a bit difficult

Child 10

Lets Play session 1

- Language skills delayed – but he's communicative
- Non-verbal problem skills seem more advanced
- Sociable boy
- Settles to play very well. Really involved
- 'Talks' alongside his play
- Revisits play and extends on several toys
- Follows prompts
- Good approach to problem-solving toys
- Engages really well
- Very good concentration

Let's Play session 2

- Non verbal problem-solving skills – quick and accurate
- Symbolic play – relatively short sequences but lots of them
- Very communicative – tries to tell me things
- Tidies away and sorts toys into bags by categories
- More confident and able to take more control eg choosing toys
- Really keen to play
- Persists on problem-solving toys – concentrates really well
- Very sociable
- Keen to use his language

Child 11

Lets Play session 1

- Able on visual problem-solving toys – no problem
- Took no notice of me or the toys at start – but when I presented toys individually, he came and looked and played
- Excellent concentration on toys
- Likes problem-solving toys but also make-believe play
- Knows what he wants to achieve – keeps going and going
- No eye contact - but tolerates me there and intervening

Let's Play session 2

- Very different this time – aware of me - gives me eye contact when meet
- Has different favourites – shape sorter – loves
- Eye contact and vocalisation – when he posts and I clap
- Doesn't want to do make-believe play
- Virtually no speech

Child 12

Lets Play session 1

- Responds to prompts and suggestions
- Symbolic play is a relative strength
- Very interested in the toys – likes to get them all out
- Very sociable – involves us all
- Clear which toys he is/isn't interested in
- Good concentration on toys he likes when he settles
- Sense of humour
- Enjoys in/out play – but beginnings of symbolic
- Settles well

Let's Play session 2

- More sounds this time, I think
- Much better on form board – pleased when he succeeds – claps
- Similar approach – gets all toys out first
- Slightly less time on toys

Appendix 18: Summary of parents' comments relating to face validity

Q 4 From your perspective as a parent, what do you think are the main strengths of play-based assessment?

5. Engaging his interest (which is difficult!)

Being able to see it all – how they're used to seeing toys.

6 It's not structured, so don't have to do anything don't want to

They can spend as long as they want

It's like a play situation – fun – they think you're a friend here to play

Get more from them

7. Familiar toys – they have them all

In the home

8 Playing with toys – get more from the child – more at their level

Play people – can act out what happens at home

It's fun – you get more

Gives a view of their level of intelligence – lots of information

I don't think a test situation would work – particularly for 3 and 4 year olds – it's boring

9 They will do more – will interact better.

Not so alien to them – he's used to toys

Familiar to what they already know

10 Toys – he's in his own element

He could take things out and put them back

In his own environment – HEPAC: doesn't like hospitals

11 You get a better picture of what a child can do

All children need encouragement to join in and some idea of what you want them to do

Formal would not be as relaxing

12 Wide selection of things

Q 5 From your perspective as a parent, what do you think are the main disadvantages?

5. Some of it's not that interesting- he sees them as 'young'.

6 If they see it as play they may not give you as much as they could – I don't know.

7. Depends on the marking

Formal test – can see how they've failed

9. There are disadvantages in anything

Depends on age and what they can do

A mix – presenting formal at right time is important – toys first

Knowledge of person giving the test is important - they understand the test – could be misleading if not (from answer to Q 5)

11 You could be leading and telling them – especially an autistic child – and get a false idea of what they can do.

12 If he doesn't do well –could be difficult

would be better to have some things that make noises

Appendix 19: Summary of parents' comments relating to children's approaches

Q 2. Thinking about the two play-based assessment sessions - how do you feel your child responded to these?

5. Preferred it – gave him lots of choice – which is good

Big box – he could see lots of things

First session - a really good reflection of what he can do when calm and trusting

Built a rapport with you very quickly

6. Did well – better than a formal assessment

When you go about it as he wants you get more out of him

Likes one on one –he's at his best

7. Typical of him

He likes

Flits between toys and goes back to favourites

8. Played lovely

Calm when played (can get overexcited with new toys)

He was relaxed

Wonderful

Likes being the centre of attention

9. Would do differently if outside of the home

Fantastic

He did well because you interacted with him – sparked him off

He is very used to this situation

10. He tried and tried

He loved it (from answer to Q 3)

11. More relaxed – he's more relaxed

12. There was always something he was interested in

He had his own views about what he was interested in.

Appendix 20: Summary of parents' comments relating to their own feelings

Q 3 How did you feel when watching the play-based assessment session/afterwards?

6. I thought he'd done well – but he's good at play – he did use speech throughout
Would be interesting to compare with what another child of his age would do.

8. Proud
Very proud of him on the behaviour front -
His enthusiasm and willingness to participate
Very happy
Pleasantly surprised (from answer to Q2)

9. First session – I didn't know what to do
Nice to see him interacting
You get pleasure to see your child doing well

10. Happy
Skills I didn't know about.
He loved it.
Astonished me the first time (from answer to Q2)

11. Impressed with the table and chairs
Impressed by the pretend play he could do
He's developed a lot in 6 months
Amazed at the things he's done (from answer to Q 5)

12. Quite enjoyed it
It's a luxury to take time out to watch him - in an environment where he's enjoying himself
Encouraging to see he *can* do some things

ASSIGNMENTS

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University College London

DEdPsy

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ASSIGNMENT 1

A CONSULTATION-BASED MODEL OF SERVICE DELIVERY TO PRE-SCHOOL PROVIDERS: AN EVALUATION OF PRACTICE

ABSTRACT

This assignment reviews a consultation-based model of Educational Psychology service delivery to pre-school providers. It describes a model developed within an Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership and evaluates that model in relation to the literature regarding consultation and, in particular, consultation in pre-school work. Evaluation of the model against the literature indicates that although the model drew upon existing practice, it also represented a development in the way Educational Psychology services are delivered to pre-school providers. Overall, the model is felt to have been a successful method of service delivery. Suggestions are made as to how it could be further developed, with particular reference to implementation and evaluation.

AIMS AND SCOPE OF THIS ASSIGNMENT

This assignment aims to critically evaluate a consultation-based model of Educational Psychology service delivery. It looks at an approach in which a consultation-based model was used to deliver an Educational Psychology service to private and voluntary pre-school settings registered with an Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP). It is based on practice within one Local Education Authority (LEA) following the introduction of a Specialist Educational Psychologist (EP) post in Early Years.

The assignment focuses on work carried out between January 2000 and April 2001.

The Specialist EP had a brief to work within the EYDCP to deliver support to the 222 private and voluntary providers registered with the Partnership. In order to meet the challenge of providing effective support to such a large number of settings, a model of service delivery based around group consultation was developed. The approach was implemented in the autumn term 2000 and has continued to operate to the present time.

The assignment has several key aims:

1. *To consider the background and context for this work, in particular:*

- The requirements of the Code of Practice Nursery Education Scheme
- Educational Psychology support to private and voluntary providers
- The development of the cluster group model
- The approaches used to implement and evaluate the model

2. *To review the psychological theory and research in key areas:*

- Definitions and features of consultation-based approaches
- Consultation models of service delivery, including group consultation
- Consultation models of service delivery in Early Years work
- Implementing consultation based approaches, including group consultation
- Evaluating the effectiveness of consultation, including group consultation

3. *To critically evaluate the work carried out in an LEA in light of the literature areas outlined above, with particular reference to:*

- The model of consultation used
- Whether the model met the conditions necessary for successful consultation
- Whether sufficient attention was paid to evaluation
- Whether the model was implemented in an appropriate way
- Whether group consultation was an appropriate model to use

4. *To provide suggestions for the future development of the group consultation model, particularly with regard to implementation and evaluation.*

1. PRACTICE AND CONTEXT

The developments described in this assignment were carried out as part of an EYDCP's work to assist private and voluntary pre-school providers to develop their practices in relation to the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs. Special Educational Needs (SEN) had been identified as a key area for in the Partnership's development plan for 2000/2001. A stated focus of this work was the development of practice within the private and voluntary sector.

1.1. The requirements of the Code of Practice Nursery Education Scheme

This increased focus on SEN in private and voluntary settings had been prompted by changes in the legislation regarding these providers' responsibilities under the Code of Practice. There is now an expectation that all providers registered with an EYDCP will have regard to the Code. These requirements are set out in the latest version of the Code of Practice Nursery Education Scheme (2000), which also gives guidance on how to apply the Code in pre-school settings. The scheme sets out the skills, knowledge and practices needed in pre-school settings in relation to SEN. Despite the fact that these increased responsibilities originally came into effect in 1996, providers were not expected to meet their requirements for some time. However, it is the author's view that since 1998 there has been an expectation that providers will have begun to meet at least some of the Code's requirements, with these expectations being increased over the last few years.

1.2. Educational Psychology support to private and voluntary providers

The drive towards meeting the requirements of the Code of Practice had led this particular Partnership to involve a Specialist EP. Prior to the appointment of the Specialist EP, private and voluntary settings had received only indirect access to support and advice from the Educational Psychology Service. EPs were involved in casework with children referred to them via Community Paediatricians, and it was not uncommon for an EP to observe the child within the pre-school setting and discuss their progress with staff as part of the assessment process. However, it is important to note that any advice given to the setting was on an informal basis, and that providers were not able to make a direct 'referral' to the Educational Psychology Service. In addition, as EP involvement was limited to casework, there was no scope for EPs to contribute to development work at a setting level, eg developing the pre-school's policies and practice in relation to Special Needs.

This lack of support, combined with the requirements of the Code of Practice, led this EYDCP to identify support to the non-maintained sector as a key area for the work of the Specialist EP. The Specialist identified the key aims of an extension of EP support to the private and voluntary sector as follows:

- To help settings to become more skilled in implementing the requirements of the Code of Practice and to help them to build their skills and knowledge in relation to SEN.
- To give advice in relation to children at Stages 1, 2 and 3 of the Code.
- To help providers to develop effective problem-solving skills in relation to SEN issues.
- To give advice on local procedures and services.

1.3. The development of the cluster group model

The cluster group model was developed as a way of allowing the 222 private and voluntary providers to access support from specialist teachers and the Specialist EP. In selecting a model, it was important to develop a way of working that could be delivered alongside the existing work of patch EPs. The model was developed over several months by a planning group involving the Specialist EP, a specialist teacher, and officers from the Partnership.

The model involved termly meetings of identified members of staff (the equivalents of Special Educational Needs Coordinators) from local groups of providers. The specialist EP and one other specialist from the Partnership team attended the meetings. All pre-school providers were expected to join a local group and meetings were held at times and venues convenient to each group. There were a maximum of 15 providers represented at each group.

The general format of a cluster group meeting was as follows:

- *A workshop on an agreed topic* (See Appendix 1: Key areas to cover in cluster group meetings)
- *A group consultation meeting*

This format and content was shared with group members at the first meeting. (See Appendix 2: Outline of a typical cluster group meeting)

The first cluster group meetings, held in the autumn term 2000, did not follow this general format. Instead, the meetings were used to introduce the cluster group model

and to introduce group consultation. In introducing group consultation, the following areas were discussed:

- *The 'ground rules' for group consultation* (see Appendix 3: Welcome to your cluster group)
- *The group consultation agenda* (see Appendix 4). This was used to help manage time within the consultation sessions. Participants were invited to list any issues they wished to raise during the session.
- *Guidelines for participation in the group consultation process*. These guidelines were in two parts: 'Things to consider when bringing an item to the group' (see Appendix 5) and 'Things to consider when supporting others in the group' (see Appendix 6). Guidance was given on roles that participants could take in the group consultation session and also on issues that required particular consideration eg confidentiality, using a non-judgmental approach, problem solving strategies, remaining positive etc.

After the first round of cluster group meetings the Specialist EP post became vacant. Subsequent sessions have been run by Advisory teachers who have received some support and supervision from an EP. This lack of continuity in direct EP involvement has not been ideal.

1.4. Initial evaluations of the cluster groups

From the outset it was agreed that it would be important to evaluate the impact of the cluster groups on providers. At the first meeting, representatives from the settings completed a short questionnaire on the current level of implementation of the Code

of Practice within their setting (see Appendix 7). This was a very simple questionnaire that looked at each SENCO's knowledge of the implementation of the Code in their setting. It used a simple system of a choice of 'yes/no/unsure' to look at whether the SENCO felt each requirement was being implemented. The choice of content area for the questionnaire was driven by two main factors:

- The fact that the key aim for the Partnership officers was to ensure that settings were meeting the requirements of the Code.
- The relative ease of gathering information on the degree of implementation of the Code.

However, as discussed later in this assignment, the decision to focus on such a narrow area for evaluation may have meant that other important areas were overlooked.

Analysis of the questionnaire responses indicated that SENCOs felt that some of the requirements of the Code were more fully implemented than others. However, on most questions there was a relatively large proportion of respondents (between 8% and 54%) who responded that they were unsure about the degree of implementation in relation to that particular question. This indicates that the SENCOs may not have had accurate knowledge about the implementation of many aspects of the Code.

Overall, the questionnaire results indicated that most settings had a copy of the Code of Practice and a written SEN policy. However, they were less confident about the actual implementation of the Code. For example:

- 51% felt there was a clear understanding of the SENCO role within the setting,
- 36% reported that the Code of Practice procedures were being implemented,
- 23% felt confident about writing Individual Education Plans,
- 20% felt they had a clear understanding of how different services worked,
- 34% knew how many children had been placed on the stages of the Code.

In contrast, SENCOs were more confident about working with parents with SEN, with 75% reporting that they felt confident. Their responses in the comments section of the questionnaire generally indicated that they were welcoming of support and guidance. For a full summary of the questionnaire results see Appendix 8.

The intention was to readminister these questionnaires at a future meeting, possibly once the meetings had been in operation for a year. This information could then be used to evaluate whether there had been an increase in the implementation of the Code over time. However, this did not happen as the specialist EP post became vacant and it was not possible to recruit a replacement. This lack of any formal follow-up evaluation significantly limited the information available on the impact of the cluster groups.

However, it was possible to carry out some informal follow-up evaluations in order to begin to look at the impact of the cluster groups. The advisory teacher reported the following:

- The sessions had been well attended: 57% attendance in autumn term 2000 and 68 % in spring term 2001.
- Pre-school workers had been willing to bring issues to group consultation. Most of these had related to individual children.
- Staff were becoming increasingly willing to take part in the consultation sessions. The Advisory teacher felt that the groups becoming less dependent on her as an 'expert' consultant and were increasingly supporting each other.

Although these comments are encouraging, they do not constitute a rigorous evaluation of the impact of the cluster groups. There is a need to develop the evaluation process in terms of:

- Readministering the original Code of Practice questionnaire in order to ascertain whether there had been any increases in the degree of implementation of the Code.
- Broadening the scope of the evaluation to incorporate a more comprehensive range of indicators, so that information is collected on the type of issues covered in the Advisory teacher's feedback.

Ways of developing the evaluation process will be discussed in more detail later in the assignment.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND RESEARCH

This review of psychological research will focus on consultation models of service delivery, as this was the most important aspect of the cluster group model. The

review will begin with a brief outline of some of the processes and activities involved in consultation, before moving on to consider these within the context of consultation-based models of EP service delivery. Particular consideration will be given to models of service delivery that use group consultation approaches and to those that involve work in the Early Years. Finally, the literature relating to implementing and evaluating consultation-based approaches will be considered.

2.1. Definitions and features of consultation based approaches

There are many definitions of consultation in relation to the work of Educational Psychologists. Gutkins and Curtis (1998) comment on the increase in the use of consultation in the US, and Stringer *et al.* (1992) review the literature and note the growth in the popularity of consultation-based approaches. They go on to consider several definitions of consultation but comment that the broadness of the term has meant that it has been difficult to clarify and compare different models and approaches. They conclude that rather than attempt to define a particular model of consultation, it is important to understand it in a way which best fits with ones own thinking. In some ways, this approach could be criticised for contributing to the lack of clarity about consultation.

Dougherty (1995) also claims that there is no simple answer to the question ‘what is consultation?’ but notes that there is some agreement in the literature over its three key components:

- The goal of consultation is to solve problems

- It involves a consultant delivering a service to a consultee who in turn delivers a service to a client.
- Consultation involves bringing about change for both the consultee and the client.

There is certainly some agreement between Dougherty's key features and those identified by Gutkins and Curtis (1998), although the latter do place slightly more emphasis on the centrality of the consultant-consultee relationship.

Despite some lack of clarity in defining consultation, there has been more work on describing models of consultation for use with schools. Conoley and Conoley (1990) look at consultative work in schools and describe consultation as 'a problem solving relationship between professionals of differing fields'. They go on to identify the key purpose as enhancing the problem solving capacity of a consultee. The consultee is also helped to identify new skills, to develop a greater sense of self-efficacy and obtain a 'better' level of objectivity.

Turning to accounts of consultation as used specifically by EPs, Wagner (1995) identifies the key element in consultation as 'a meeting of peers over school based concerns', where the peers are the EP and the teacher. Control over the referral process is seen as lying with the consultee, with key outcomes being to help the teacher to reconceptualise the problem and to decide upon actions that may be needed to bring about change.

Others writers have more closely attempted to define the stages involved in the consultation with an EP. Connor (1993) describes a model of practice for use by EPs that includes the following stages:

- entry
- diagnosis
- action planning
- implementation
- termination

Labram (1992) describes a similar model, although there is a slightly greater emphasis on consultation as a problem-solving approach. His four stages of the process are as follows:

- problem identification
- problem analysis
- plan implementation
- evaluation

It is interesting to note that Labram's final stage is evaluation rather than termination, although Connor does also include elements of evaluation in his termination stage. However, given the lack of research on evaluating consultation approaches, this emphasis is a strength of Labram's model.

Wagner (1995b) takes a slightly different approach to defining the stages of a consultation model for use by EPs. She provides prompt questions for the different aspects of consultation rather than naming distinct stages. However, implicit in her model are different elements within a quite closely defined consultation process eg initial information collection and data gathering, and a stage for recording the outcomes of the consultation. Wagner's model appears to conceptualise consultation

as an ongoing process rather than a process that has discrete steps, but it does have similarities to the 'stage' models described above.

2.2. Consultation models of Educational Psychology service delivery

A useful starting point when considering consultation as a model of service delivery is the overview by Leadbetter (2000). In this useful review she remarks upon the lack of information on the ways in which EP services are delivered to schools. She also comments on the lack of clear rationales in the choice of particular models by EP services. Although the focus of Leadbetter's review was service delivery to schools, it may well have parallels with EP service delivery to pre-school providers. The literature on pre-school service delivery in the UK is sparse and much of the current discussion will therefore draw upon school-based studies. However, there will also be consideration of the few studies that relate specifically to pre-school service delivery.

Consultation appears to be an increasingly popular model of service delivery. In her review, Leadbetter (2000) surveyed job adverts in the AEP Broadsheet over a 5 month period during 1998 and found that approximately 1/3 of services mentioned consultancy when describing the way they worked. Conoley and Conoley (1990) describe the factors leading to the increase in consultation work by EPs. They identify the fact that there are too few EPs to offer direct service delivery, that those working directly with children can be most effective in bringing about change, and that interventions are best placed within real-life contexts. Wagner (1995, 1995b) notes similar pressures to Conoley and Conoley and goes on to comment that consultation can be viewed as a way of overcoming some of the pressures on EPs to

respond in a more 'traditional' way. It is interesting that within the literature there is an emphasis on pragmatic considerations as well as on issues relating to the perceived effectiveness of consultation. In contrast, Turner *et al.* (1996) focus on the theoretical rationales for moving towards consultative approaches. They comment that:

"Individual EPs and EPS teams have looked towards models of consultation to provide a theoretical structure to service delivery whereby contextual factors can be explored and interventions made" (p. 86)

They see consultation discussions as key elements in helping to problem-solve at the earlier stages of the Code of Practice. In their model, consultation is seen as a way of moving towards approaches where children's problems are not measured against 'normality' and where participants are encouraged to find their own solutions to problems. As they provide a strong theoretical stance to underpin the use of consultation, their arguments are more powerful in providing rationales for the use of such approaches.

The recent literature within the field of Educational Psychology includes several descriptions of the consultation models used by individual services. For example, Gillies (2000) outlines the history and ongoing development of consultation in Surrey EPS and Dickinson (2000) describes the development of consultation in the Lincolnshire service.

Despite the fact that several services have described their consultation frameworks, it does appear that consultation means different things to different authors, and the lack

of clarity described by Stringer *et al.* (1992) is still apparent in the recent literature. The range of service delivery models claiming to be consultation-based varies from general models within which almost any activity can be fitted (e.g. Conoley & Conoley, 1990; Dickinson, 2000), through to processes which incorporate discussions and classroom observations (e.g. Wagner, 1990), and on to approaches which are based much more on consultation discussions (Gillies, 2000). However, it is often difficult to be clear exactly what type of model the authors are describing and any attempt to categorise and compare the approaches taken by different services can therefore only be tentative.

Models of service delivery based upon group consultation

Stringer *et al.* (1992) review the literature on support groups for education professionals and note the great diversity of approaches that have been used. Many of the groups they describe are discussion groups rather than true consultation groups. One of the leading workers in the use of consultation-based groups is Hanko (1985) who advocates a consultation approach with schools 'through individual and group discussions'. She describes in some detail how the groups are run, with the main features of the model being as follows:

- Attendance at the groups is voluntary
- Groups usually involve staff from a single school, although they can cover more than one school
- Each session focuses on a single case
- The ultimate aim is for the groups to continue on their own, without the external consultant

Hanko provides considerable detail on the running of the groups but places relatively little emphasis on the underlying theories of consultation. Stringer *et al.* (1992) describe how an EPS set up and successfully ran groups based on Hanko's model.

2.3. Consultation models of service delivery in Early Years work

The literature on models of EP service delivery in relation to Early Years work is relatively sparse and is dominated by models of individual assessment work (e.g. Barnett *et al.*, 1997; Smith, Keen & Daley, 1996). As mentioned previously, the majority of work on consultation has focused on school-based approaches, with little or no consideration of service delivery to pre-school providers. For example, Gillies (2000) discusses how an EPS delivered training in consultation to 140 schools and only 1 nursery school.

However, some descriptions of more consultation-based Early Years practice do exist. Hobson (1997) looked at the changing role of the EP in light of developments within the field of Early Years, particularly in relation to the increased responsibilities of pre-school providers at that time. She talks about the broadening role of the EP in light of these developments and focuses on the increase in multi-agency working. However, in discussing the role of the Specialist Early Years EP within one EPS, she does mention that a key task was 'to offer regular consultation sessions at the three family centres'.

Smith and Reynolds (1998) provide one of the few overviews of a consultation-based approach to pre-school service delivery in an EP service. They describe how their service had adopted a new consultation approach to work with schools, with an

increased focus on preventative work at stages 1-3. They note that pre-school work had not originally been incorporated into this new model. Instead, this work tended to involve 'late' referrals and a rush to produce a statement of Special Educational Needs prior to school entry. Concerns over the appropriateness of this model led to an extension of the consultation approach to pre-school work. However, their model is still based upon a traditional model of service delivery, in that the consultation element is based upon discussions between health professionals and the EP, with no mention of staff from pre-school settings. It could be argued that, as these staff are working with the children on a day to day basis, they would be key people to involve in any consultation model that aims to bring about changes for the children. Smith and Reynolds do mention the need to provide training for Early Years workers on meeting SEN but the impression is that these workers are not seen as partners within the consultation model.

2.4. Implementing consultation based approaches to service delivery

Several authors discuss the conditions they feel are necessary for consultation based models of service delivery to work. Gillies (2000) discusses five ingredients for effective consultation within an EPS. They are:

- Time
- Space
- The voluntary nature of attendance
- An understanding of consultation by consultee
- The approval within working systems for consultation to take place.

Similarly, Wagner (1995) identifies the following factors as key in the effective implementation of her consultation model of service delivery:

- A clear model of consultation
- A time allocation system which creates sufficient time for consultations
- Clear systems and responsibilities for prioritising work within a school
- The ability of the EP to explain consultation to the school
- A system for reviewing consultation with the school

Other authors have focused on the process of introducing a consultation-based approach. Conoley and Conoley (1990) consider factors such as establishing commitment and support for the approach, both from within the service and from service users. Several authors also stress the importance of communicating a clear model of consultation to service users. For example, Conoley and Conoley recommend training events to explain consultation and Turner *et al.* (1996) describe using a service brochure to explain consultation to schools. Gillies (2000) outlines in some detail the training processes put in place within one service. In this service consultation workshops were set up in order to help participants to gain a better understanding of the rationale behind the consultation process. Within this approach there was also a focus on helping the participants to develop skills and helping them to think about how they could use consultation within their own settings. Gillies outlines how, during the training sessions, the consultation process was modelled using techniques such as asking participants to identify their own learning goals. Role-play was used to practise skills and Gillies describes this as 'by far the most influential experience of the training'. Participants also observed a live consultation and practiced consultation within their own settings.

Another key consideration in implementing consultation approaches appears to be time. Turner *et al.* (1996) stress the importance of giving EPs sufficient time to develop the necessary skills to act as consultants. Conoley and Conoley (1990)

suggest that a 3-5 year service development and implementation period is necessary and note the need for patience by those involved.

Particular considerations for group consultation

Hanko (1985) describes in some detail the process of setting up consultation groups and draws on many of areas discussed above. However, she also identifies several issues that relate specifically to groups. These include ensuring that staff who do not attend the groups do not feel excluded and establishing clear guidelines for the running of the groups eg, size, duration, frequency etc.

2.5. Evaluating the effectiveness of consultation

Several authors stress the importance of evaluating consultation when it is used as part of an approach to service delivery. Labram (1992) stresses that rigorous evaluation is vital and Dickinson (2000) stresses the importance of having a clear model against which to evaluate outcomes.

Despite the increase in the popularity of consultation as a model of service delivery, the research into its effectiveness is relatively scarce. The research evidence that does exist tends to be based on consultation approaches used by school psychologists in the US. For example, Gutkins and Curtis (1990) looked at the outcomes of consultation in terms of improved educational outcomes for children, positive effects for other children, and improvements in teachers' attributions and problem solving skills.

Connor (1993) reviewed published studies on consultation and noted that many studies evaluate consumer satisfaction rather than actual outcomes. This would appear to be true of many of the evaluations of EP services in the UK. For example, Wagner (1995) looked at schools' perceptions of a consultation-based model of service delivery over a 5 year period. She notes that consultation was perceived positively, but the evaluation does not go on to evaluate any actual outcomes. It is interesting to note that in a later paper (Wagner, 2000) she claims:

“When consultation works as it is intended, a greater capacity develops in the system for developing solutions, and there is less amplifying of deviance and pathology.” (p.12)

However, no research data is provided to support this claim. Similarly, Turner *et al.* (1996) discuss how effective consultation can be in bringing about change for children and adults, but provide no examples or research evidence.

Turning to the evaluation of outcomes in relation to pre-school work, Smith and Reynolds (1998) have carried out an informal evaluation of a pre-school approach that includes consultation between EPs and other professionals. They tracked a number of referrals and found that many did not progress beyond consultation at Stage 3. They also found a decrease in statutory assessments for pre-school children and a reduction in the number of children placed in pre-school assessment centres. They also mention that other agencies may have gained a better understanding of the assessment process. However, this study was only informal, and clear baselines were not established before the consultation approach was introduced. Also, as the approach involved consultation between professionals, it may be of limited value in

providing evidence to support a consultation model that involves working directly with pre-school settings. Nevertheless, it is one of the few studies to have looked at consultation outcomes in the UK and virtually the only one that has looked at the evaluation of a pre-school consultation model.

Evaluations of group consultation approaches

Once again, the main work in relation to group consultation is Hanko's (1985). She places a strong emphasis on evaluation, both during and after the running of consultation groups and describes some of the evaluation work carried out. This involved an evaluator observing that participants' perceptions of children's difficulties changed and that they became more open to new ways of viewing problems. There was also some attempt to look at changes that were brought about by the group approach. Observations and teacher comments indicated that the group of teachers explored more dimensions of a problem and that their confidence grew as a result of finding out that others shared similar difficulties. Teachers commented that they 'especially appreciated the atmosphere of supportive interdependence'. Stringer *et al.* (1992) also carried out some evaluations of groups based on Hanko's model. Using pre, post and follow-up questionnaires they evaluated teacher perceptions about the groups. However, their reported evaluations focus on how the participants felt the groups had been run and how they were valued by participants, rather than on any outcomes.

In summary, it seems fair to say that the increase in the popularity of consultation-based models of service delivery is not underpinned by a large body of research evidence supporting the effectiveness of such approaches. Evaluations of group

consultation are scarce and suffer from many of the same shortcomings as those of individual consultation. However, there does seem to be a greater emphasis on evaluation within the group approaches.

This lack of emphasis on evaluation of consultation-based approaches is particularly interesting given the importance of evaluation within the field of education. Stecher and Davis (1987) note that evaluation is particularly important within education due to the requirement to demonstrate effective intervention approaches and programmes. It may well be that evaluation approaches taken from educational evaluation could inform the evaluation of consultation approaches.

3. INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

This section will review the cluster group model of consultation for pre-school providers in light of the research literature described above. Several key areas will be discussed:

1. Did the consultation process fit with the models described in the literature?
2. Did the model meet the conditions identified as necessary for consultation?
3. Was sufficient attention paid to evaluation?
4. Was the model implemented in an appropriate way?
5. Was group consultation an appropriate model to use?

3.1. Did the consultation process relate to the models described in the literature?

The cluster group consultation model was based on Connor's (1993) stages of consultation, but the stages were simplified and adapted to the particular circumstances. A key difference was that the last stage of Connor's model was omitted. In this stage, which he calls termination, he describes how the EP should withdraw from the consultation and evaluation take place. However, he also notes that the EP can choose to withdraw at the implementation stage, and in many ways this is what the cluster group model encouraged. Once the consultee had discussed an issue with the group and planned possible actions, the consultation ended. This lack of a discrete evaluation stage does not fit with the model of Labram (1992) where the final stage of the consultation process is called evaluation. The lack of such a stage in the cluster group process could be viewed as a serious shortcoming of the model, and an improvement suggestion might be to encourage participants to revisit issues and outcomes with the group once they have implemented actions.

Turning to the group consultation models described in the literature, there were some key differences between Hanko's approach and the cluster group model. For example, attendance at the cluster groups was not voluntary, the meetings involved several settings, more than one issue was consulted upon in a session, and the aim was not to develop groups that would become independent of the EP. However, in other respects the model used was very close to those described in the literature, with possibly a slightly greater emphasis on the ideas from individual consultation.

3.2. Did the model meet the conditions identified as necessary for consultation?

This section will compare how the group consultation model related to the 'conditions for consultation' described by Wagner (1995) and Gillies (2000).

A commitment to consultation

This was an area of strength for the model. The involvement of officers from the Partnership on the development working group enhanced the commitment from senior managers within the EYDCP. There was surprisingly little resistance to the idea of group consultation, perhaps because it was seen of one way of 'sharing out' a small amount of EP time between a large number of providers. This would fit with Conoley and Conoley's (1990) suggestion that a move towards more consultative approaches can be driven, at least partly, by having too few EPs to offer direct service delivery.

It remains to be seen whether there was a commitment to group consultation on the part of the participants. Initial impressions indicate that the idea of group consultation was positively received by the pre-school workers but further work will be needed to find out how positively they view the process once they have attended several sessions.

A clear understanding of consultation

During the first cluster group meeting, time was spent discussing the consultation process, as recommended by Hanko (1985). Participants were provided with written guidelines, which may have been similar to the written material described by Gillies in her description of implementing a consultation model. However, it is probably

true to say that the rather rushed approach to implementation may not have helped participants to gain a very 'deep' understanding of consultation. It would be interesting to assess their understanding of consultation at some point in the future.

Timing and frequency of visits

The consultation model made use of regular visits as suggested by Wagner, although it is true to say that the visits were not as frequent as she would recommend. Two hours were allocated to each cluster group meeting, with approximately 45 minutes being used for the group consultation session. Individual issues raised within the group situation were allocated 5 to 15 minutes rather than the 45 minutes recommended by Wagner (1995b) recommends or the hour recommended by Hanco (1985).

Careful consideration was given to the timings of the meetings, with sessions being held at times that were suitable for the majority of participants in a group. In practice this meant that many of the meetings were held during evenings. Although this was effective in freeing participants from some of the pressures of time, it may have helped to dissociate the consultations from the work in settings during the day.

The venue for consultation

Providers were also asked to choose the venue for their meetings. In selecting venues the overriding principle was to make the venue local to a particular group so as to minimise travel and time demands. In reality, this often meant using the pre-school setting. As Hanco (1985) comments, this is helpful in placing the consultation within a 'live' and meaningful context. It may also have enhanced the

feeling of group cooperation, by encouraging providers to visit other settings or act as hosts to others in the group.

Ensuring that consultees are treated as peers who can access consultation on a voluntary basis

This factor was not well accommodated within the cluster group model, as there was an expectation from the Early Years Partnership that all providers would attend the meetings. However, within the group consultation it was the responsibility of individuals to decide whether they wished to bring items to the group, so there was an element of choice in whether to act as a consultee. There was also a degree of choice as to whether to contribute comments and questions as a group consultant.

The group consultation model did keep the control of the referral process with consultees, as Wagner recommends. They had control of the agenda through the use of the agenda sheets, and initial impressions were that this system worked well.

3.3. Was sufficient attention paid to evaluation?

The omission of an evaluation stage in the cluster group model has already been discussed when considering how the model related to those described in the literature. We will now consider the issues relating to the evaluation of the overall model of service delivery.

Wagner (1995) and Hanko (1985) both comment that evaluation should be an integral part of the consultation system and Dickinson (2000) stresses that EPs should be clear about the changes they hope to produce. The cluster group approach did not include any explicit evaluation, beyond looking (at some point in the future)

at the development of consultees' practice in their settings. It is true to say that evaluation was a bolt-on extra rather than theme that ran through the model of service delivery.

It is interesting to look at the evaluation of the cluster groups within the context of evaluation as a whole. Stecher and Davis (1987) note the importance of evaluation within education and outline a range of approaches that can be taken. If we consider the cluster group evaluation within their framework, it would probably fit most closely with a goal-oriented approach, in that the goals set out in the Code of Practice were used as the criteria for measuring success. However, Stecher and Davis note that, in this type of evaluation, important unintended outcomes can be overlooked. As the evaluation did not look beyond the Code of Practice goals it may have excluded some important targets in other areas, e.g. the growth in participants' confidence and the links that were developing between settings.

The evaluation was also very much under the control of the EP and the Early Years team, and it may be helpful to incorporate more of what Stecher and Davis describe as a user-oriented approach. This would involve working with the SENCOs themselves and placing a greater emphasis on the evaluation process rather than solely on its outcomes. This might result in more meaningful evaluation data and encourage SENCOs to be more reflective about the changes. The ready-made cluster groups would lend themselves to user involvement through techniques such as focus groups and nominal group techniques.

It could also be argued that the small amount evaluation that was carried out did not focus on the areas identified as important in the literature, e.g. Connor (1993). The

evaluation failed to look at factors such as changes in teachers' perceptions and problem solving skills. This is a serious oversight, given the emphasis in the literature on changes in the consultee's perceptions. Conoley and Conoley (1990) stress that the purpose of consultation is to enhance the problem solving capacity of the consultee and Wagner (1995) talks about changing teachers' perceptions of a problem. The types of evaluations carried out by Gillies (2000) and by Gutkins and Curtis (1990) might be useful in relation to the cluster group model, and it would certainly have been helpful to have included questionnaire items which focused more on perceptions and which required more open-ended responses.

There is also a need to evaluate the cluster groups over a longer period of time. The initial plan was to evaluate changes in practice after one year, but if implementation can take up to 5 years (Conoley & Conoley, 1990) then this may be too soon. What appears to be needed is repeated reviews of participants' knowledge, skills and attitudes over a longer period of time.

Finally, there were also some strengths in the evaluation process. Patton (1982) stresses the importance of making evaluations practical and notes that many fail simply because it is not possible to implement them. The cluster group evaluation was simple to administer and provided information that could easily be used to monitor the progress of the settings over time. Keeping the focus of the evaluation very narrow may have made the information obtained less meaningful, but it certainly made that information easier to obtain.

3.4. Was the model implemented in an appropriate way?

Time was taken to introduce the consultation model to participants, although the training was much less formal than that described by Conoley and Conoley (1990) and Gillies (2000). Participants were talked through the model and the assumption was that they would practise and develop their skills as they attended the actual sessions. However, this introductory session was in many ways rather superficial and didactic and very unlike the initial group meetings described by Hanko (1985). Participants were given handouts on consultation and time was spent discussing the process, but this is unlikely to have been sufficient to give participants a very deep understanding of the process. In addition, the way in which the introductory session was run did not provide a model of the consultation process in the way that Gillies (2000) says that training should. The knowledge, expertise and power was firmly located within the EP who was 'teaching' the process to the staff.

Finally, the initial training was very much a one-off event. If, as Conoley and Conoley (1990) suggest, implementation takes 3-5 years then this is unlikely to prove sufficient. It may well be that further sessions will need to be allocated to revisiting and reflecting on the group consultation process with participants.

3.5. Was group consultation the most appropriate model to use?

Several authors have suggested that pressure on EP work is one of the factors leading to the use of consultation, and the choice of this model in this situation was certainly linked to such pressures. With only one EP to 222 settings, this model enabled all the settings to have termly contact with the EP. However, the group consultation model also fits with more theoretical rationales for using consultation, in that it

involves the people who are best placed to actually carry out interventions and allows some sharing of expertise between peers. This is in contrast with other pre-school models which have focused upon consultation with professionals e.g. Smith and Reynolds (1998). The aim of the consultation sessions was to help the pre-school workers share their knowledge, support each other and develop their problem solving skills. Group consultation would seem to fit more closely with these aims than with an approach based on individual consultation sessions or on consultations with professionals.

The model also fits in with the view of Turner *et al.* (1996) that consultation is best placed at Stage 3 or possibly even earlier, before people have 'made up their minds' about a child's problems. Nevertheless, it is true to say that there was initially some pressure from the pre-school settings to become involved in casework in a more traditional, assessment-based way. This was despite the fact that this aspect of EP work was still being carried out by the patch EPs. Retaining a commitment to consultation and resisting these pressures was of key importance in demonstrating a belief in the effectiveness of consultation. Initial indications are that the pressures to engage in individual assessment work have decreased as the group consultations have developed.

To some extent, it is difficult to really know at this early stage whether group consultation was the most appropriate model to use. The literature on using consultation-based approaches in the pre-school work of EPs is small and this model was quite different to those described by others e.g. Smith, Keen and Daley (1996), Barnett *et al.* (1997) and Smith and Reynolds (1998). However, there is a literature

which supports the use of group consultation with schools and it therefore seems reasonable to assume that it may be an appropriate model to use with pre-school settings. Only ongoing evaluations of the outcomes of such an approach will determine whether this is the case.

4. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This assignment has described a model of group consultation for private and voluntary pre-school providers. The model was devised to help these providers meet their increased responsibilities, as set out in the Code of Practice. Some of the reasons for selecting group rather than individual consultation were purely pragmatic, e.g. it was viewed as an effective way of allowing 222 providers to access support from a single Specialist EP. However, the choice of this model was also underpinned by a commitment on the part of the Early Years Partnership to consultation as an effective model of EP service delivery.

Despite the relative lack of research directly related to group consultation in the Early Years, the literature does provide some indication of the issues to be considered in the development, implementation and evaluation of such an approach. In evaluating this particular model against the existing literature, the following conclusions have been reached:

- **The cluster group model** - The cluster group model was originally based upon the literature on individual consultation by EPs. However, it represents developments in service delivery to preschool providers in two key respects - it involves direct consultation with providers and it uses group rather than individual consultation.
- **The conditions necessary for consultation** – The cluster group model met many of the conditions described in the literature relating to both group and individual consultation. However, there were some key departures, e.g. the non-voluntary attendance by participants, a relatively short time allocated for consultation discussions and a lack of revisiting the outcomes of consultations.
- **Evaluation** –The literature on evaluating consultation approaches is relatively small but it does give some indications as to appropriate approaches. The cluster group model was not evaluated beyond a rather simplistic outcome questionnaire and the evaluation of the model could certainly be improved. Suggestions for developments include focusing on changes in staff problem-solving skills and carrying out evaluations over a longer period of time.
- **Implementation** – Many authors stress the importance of careful implementation, and the cluster group model could be criticised for not paying sufficient attention to this area. There is a need to give participants opportunities to practise and reflect on their consultation skills.

- **The appropriateness of group consultation** – the cluster group model was very successful in meeting the pragmatic issues related to service delivery. It also incorporated many of the theoretical ideas from individual and group consultation models of EP service delivery. Initial impressions of the groups have been positive but until quality evaluations are carried out it is unclear whether, and in what respects, group consultation is an effective model of service delivery to pre-school providers.

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APPENDIX 1

KEY AREAS TO COVER IN CLUSTER GROUP MEETINGS

1. Developing skills of mutual support and problem solving

- Cluster group approach and values
- Group consultation
- Problem solving models
- Active listening
- Supporting others
- Confidentiality

2. Developing knowledge, skills and attitudes in relation to Special Educational Needs

General

- Key principles, values and issues in SEN
- Inclusion
- Access to the curriculum and equal opportunities
- Admissions and provision
- Relevant legislation – especially the Code of Practice

SEN in the Early Years

- The importance of the Early Years for children with SEN
- Early identification
- Particular issues for pre-school providers

The Code of Practice

- SEN policies
- Code of Practice 5 stage model
- Identification, observation and assessment
- Planning for individual needs
- Monitoring and review
- Statutory assessment, statements and Annual Reviews
- Transfer and transition

The role of the SENCO

- The role of the SENCO
- Supporting colleagues
- Working with external agencies
- Reviewing current practice and bringing about change in the setting

APPENDIX 2

OUTLINE OF A TYPICAL CLUSTER GROUP MEETING

A typical meeting will last between 2 and 2 ½ hours.

The general format will be:

1. Workshop

This will cover a particular topic or topics using a mixture of input, group discussion and group activities.

Initially, the topics will be chosen by the Partnership team so as to ensure that key areas are covered. However, it is hoped that over time groups will begin to identify topics that are of particular interest to them

Break

2. Group consultation meeting

This is an opportunity for group members to bring to the group issues relating to their work within their own settings.

This could include sharing information about a course they have attended or about resources they have found particularly helpful. It will also provide an opportunity for members to bring problems and issues to the group for discussion. These could relate to individual children or to general SEN issues. The aim will be for the group to provide a supportive setting in which to think through issues and plan actions.

APPENDIX 3

Welcome to your Cluster Group



- *A relaxed, supportive and enjoyable meeting*
- *As people get to know each other we hope that the groups will form the basis of informal contact and support at other times*
- *Everyone's contribution will be valued*
- *We acknowledge the range of skills and experience in the group*
- *We appreciate that for people who are new to this role, it will take time to build knowledge and skills*
- *The first cluster group meetings will cover key areas chosen by the Partnership team. As time goes on we would welcome groups taking over more responsibility for the topics covered in meetings.*
- *Wherever possible, handouts will be provided. These will cover the key points and are designed as reference material for future use.*
- *The cluster groups are being run by a team from the Partnership. Although different people may attend the meetings, they will be working together.*
- *We acknowledge that it will take time for the groups to become established and for people to get to know each other.*
- *The Partnership will evaluate the effectiveness of the groups, to ensure that they are meeting the needs of settings.*

APPENDIX 4

GROUP CONSULTATION AGENDA

name	item	time	comments

APPENDIX 5

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN BRINGING AN ITEM TO THE GROUP

- **What type of issue are you bringing?**

are you giving information to the group about a course, resources etc?

or

are you requesting information from the group about a particular issue?

or

are you consulting with the group about a particular 'problem'?

- **What do you want to achieve as an outcome of the discussion?**

- **How much time do you need?**

Bringing an item to the group for consultation

There may be times when group members wish to bring issues related to particular children to the group for consultation. When doing this:

- Do not use the names of any adults or children, or describe them in ways which would identify them to the group
- Spend some time before the meeting thinking about how you are going to describe the problem to the group:
 - What is your main concern?
 - What actions have you taken so far?
 - What happened as a result?
 - When is the problem less severe?
 - What does the child/person do well?
 - What resources and people do you have available to help you in the setting?
 - What are other people's views of the problem?
 - How would you know that the problem was starting to get better?
- When telling the group about the problem, try to stick to the factual information. Be clear about what is a description of problem and what is your interpretation of what happened. Do not make value judgements about the people in the problem situation. Try to give a brief but informative summary of the problem (this is actually much more difficult than it sounds!).

Remember

These skills will be very helpful to you in your work as a SENCO. You will need to encourage colleagues in your setting to use some of these approaches when they bring problems to you!

APPENDIX 6

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN SUPPORTING OTHERS IN THE GROUP

'Golden rules'

- **Be positive and give plenty of encouragement**
- **Avoid making value judgements**
- **Maintain confidentiality**

1. Allow the person time to tell you about the problem

- listen carefully
- show that you are interested (active listening skills)
- don't interrupt

2. Ask for clarification if you are unsure about anything that has been said

3. Try to help the person think through the problem –try not to tell them what they should do!

- resist the temptation to give advice
- try to ask questions which help the person explore the problem and think about it in a different way
- try to use open ended questions e.g. why, when, how etc.
- find out what the person would like to happen

4. Help the person think of an action plan

- remember that it is not you who decides what should happen next, it is the person with the problem
- it is OK to suggest strategies, but remember the person can decide that they are not suitable in their particular situation
- try to think about the next (often small) steps rather than about solving the problem completely
- think about how the person will know if things are getting better

Remember

Helping people to think through their problems and plan what to do next is one of the key skills of a SENCO. You will find it useful to use these skills when colleagues in your setting come to you with a problem.

APPENDIX 7

IMPLEMENTING THE CODE OF PRACTICE IN PRIVATE AND VOLUNTARY SETTINGS - BASELINE FOR CLUSTER GROUPS

DOCUMENTATION AND GUIDELINES

PLEASE CIRCLE

Does your setting have a copy of the Code of Practice on the identification and assessment of SEN (1994)?	YES	NO	UNSURE
Does your setting have a copy of the Code of Practice additional guidance for providers outside of the maintained sector of education?	YES	NO	UNSURE
Does your setting have any information on the Buckinghamshire procedures for children with SEN?	YES	NO	UNSURE

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS POLICY

Does your setting have a written SEN policy that all staff are aware of?	YES	NO	UNSURE
Do the staff review and develop the policy?	YES	NO	UNSURE

SEN CO-ORDINATOR

Is there a clear understanding of the role of the SENCo within your setting?	YES	NO	UNSURE
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IMPLEMENTING THE CODE OF PRACTICE STAGE PROCEDURES

Are the stage procedures operating within your setting?	YES	NO	UNSURE
---	-----	----	--------

Approximately how many children do you have who are currently placed on the stage procedures?	YES	NO	UNSURE
Would you feel confident about writing Individual Education Plans for children at stages 2 and above?	YES	NO	UNSURE
Do you keep individual records for children with SEN, detailing progress, action taken etc?	YES	NO	UNSURE

PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS AND CARERS

Do you feel confident about working together with parents of children with SEN?	YES	NO	UNSURE
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WORKING WITH SERVICES

Has your setting been invited to any multi-agency meetings about individual children?	YES	NO	UNSURE
Do you feel you know how the different services work and how they become involved?	YES	NO	UNSURE

ANY OTHER COMMENTS

--

APPENDIX 8

IMPLEMENTING THE CODE OF PRACTICE IN PRIVATE AND VOLUNTARY SETTINGS - SUMMARY OF BASELINE QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Question	Yes	No	Unsure	Blank	Total number
Does setting have a copy of the Code of Practice?	82	13	27	0	122
Does setting have a copy of the Additional Guidance?	19	37	66	0	122
Does setting have information on the LEA procedures for SEN?	36	27	59	0	122
Does the setting have an SEN policy that all staff are aware of?	94	7	21	0	122
Do staff review and develop the policy?	63	46	13	0	122
Is there an understanding of the role of SENCO within the setting?	62	44	16	0	122
Are the stage procedures operating within the setting?	44	55	23	0	122
Do you feel confident about writing IEPs?	28	61	33	0	122
Do you keep individual records for children with SEN?	63	45	14	0	122
Do you feel confident about working with parents in relation to SEN?	92	12	18	0	122
Has your setting been invited to multi-agency meetings about children?	31	81	10	0	122
Do you know how different agencies work and become involved?	24	56	42	0	122
Totals	638	484	342	0	1464

No. of children on COP stages	No of providers
1	18
2	11
3	4
6	1
6	1
10	1
20	1
32	1
60	1
80	1

Comments

I have only been working in this setting for three months.
 As SENCO I have 200 families to cover which is too many.
 I need more knowledge on stages 1-5 of the Code of Practice.
 Speech Therapists are very helpful for advice for SEN children.
 We have found ways round waiting lists by using 'who you know' philosophy.
 Within pre-school an IDP is more appropriate than an IEP.
 A lot of room for improvement!
 I have great hopes for support from the LEA so that we can implement the programme confidently.
 Until now there has been little support with the SEN problems we have found.
 Looking forward to bringing issues to a group where strategies and ideas are available (x2).
 I have worked in Primary so Early Years is new to me so I need guidelines.
 I have good knowledge of SEN. I would like help with setting up and communicating SENCO role.
 Confidentiality is an issue in my setting eg committee members being involved.
 Need more involvement from other agencies not *how* they become involved.
 Have difficulty getting agencies to give us guidance as to what to do with the SEN child.

ASSIGNMENT 2

ASSISTANT EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS: POST-MODERN APPRENTICES?

ABSTRACT

This assignment considers current practice and possible future directions for the work of Assistant Educational Psychologists and, in particular, the place of this role within training. It looks at current practice within this area through an examination of a model of Assistant work developed within one educational psychology service.

Current practice and research within the profession is reviewed in terms of the work of Assistants, the outcomes for services, the training and support given and also the benefits for Assistants. The wider literature on work-based learning is considered, particularly with regard to concepts of apprenticeship and ways of promoting effective learning.

Finally, current practice is reviewed both in terms of the research within the profession and the wider literature on work-based learning and apprenticeship. Suggestions are given for developing the role of Assistants as apprentices and placing their experiences within the context of possible changes to training routes for Educational Psychologists.

AIMS AND SCOPE OF THIS ASSIGNMENT

This assignment aims to investigate some of the roles and assumptions related to the work of Assistant Educational Psychologists. As well as considering the nature of this role, it focuses on issues related to the role as a learning experience. It illustrates current practice through a description of an Assistant programme introduced within one particular Educational Psychology (EP) service in 2001. This model provides an insight into what appears to be a relatively little understood role across the profession. The introduction of Assistants in this particular service was driven by mainly pragmatic concerns relating to service delivery issues in a time of staff shortages. The programme has now run successfully for a year and initial evaluations have been carried out. The service continues to employ Assistants.

This model is then considered within the wider context of the role of Assistants across the profession. Research is reviewed and the work of Assistants and the outcomes for services are described. The training and support given by services is also discussed, along with the outcomes for the Assistants themselves. The assignment then moves on to consider the wider literature on work-based learning and, in particular, apprenticeship models of learning. This moves the field of discussion away from Educational Psychology towards more general considerations of learning in the workplace. Models and issues in this type of learning are discussed, with a focus on effective workplace learning.

The assignment then reconsiders the work of Assistants in light of both the literature on current practice and the wider literature on learning in the workplace. Issues are

highlighted and suggestions for developing the Assistant's role as an apprentice are discussed.

The assignment has several key aims:

1. To review the current context and practice in relation to Assistants

1.1 *The national context*

Patterns of employment; the roles of Assistants; training routes

1.2 *An example of an Assistant programme*

Rationale, development, implementation and evaluation

1.3 *Summary*

2. To review the literature on the practice and rationales for Assistants

2.1 *Overview of the literature*

The size and scope of the literature

2.2 *The role of Assistants*

Activities carried out by Assistants; outcomes for services; training and support; benefits for Assistants

2.3 *Workplace learning*

Apprenticeship models; informal learning; social and emotional aspects; workplace and academic learning

3. To reconsider existing practice in light of both areas of literature and consider implications for developing the role of Assistants

3.1 *How did the Assistant programme relate to those described in the literature?*

3.2 *How did the programme relate to the literature on work-based learning?*

3.3 *Conclusions and suggestions for developing the Assistant role*

1. PRACTICE AND CONTEXT IN RELATION TO ASSISTANTS

1.1. The national Context

Patterns of employment

Before describing a particular Assistant EP model it may be helpful to gain a picture of the current pattern of Assistant programmes nationally. Imich and Counsell (2000) note that there has been a recent increase in the number of Assistant posts but provide no evidence to support this claim. More solid evidence is, however, available from the staffing surveys carried out by the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP). These surveys, although somewhat irregular in timing, indicate that the number of posts is relatively small but growing.

YEAR	NUMBER OF POSTS	SOURCE
1991	9 (+ 1 Vacant post)	AEP (1994)
1992	9	AEP (1994)
1994	11	AEP (1995)
1999	20	AEP (1999)

There is also evidence that there has been a further increase in the number of posts. Imich and Counsell (2000) claim that a more recent survey indicates that in 2000 there were approximately 40 posts. Once again, they do not provide details of the source of this information.

The role of the Assistants

Despite the fact that many services now employ Assistants, there appears to be no agreed definition of the post. However, information on the role is available from descriptions of particular models of practice. Perhaps the best-described model is the Essex programme, as outlined by Imich *et al.* (1999). This gives a 'flavour' of the role, which can be summarised as follows:

- Based on a two year temporary contract
- Assistants have the pre-requisites for entry to training courses
- An expectation that Assistants secure a place on a training course
- Assistants work as part of a small team of EPs
- They offer services to all secondary and some primary schools
- They have a clearly defined role and intensive training and support

Assistants and training routes

Currently, within the profession, there is much debate about training in general and it is important to be aware of this context in relation to the Assistant role. Farrell and Lundt (1995) note that concerns about the nature of training have existed since the 1970s but comment that during the 1990s debate about this area has increased. Recently, several authors have discussed proposals to increase the postgraduate training period to 3 years (Frederickson & Collins, 1997; Frederickson *et al.*, 1999; Imich, 1999; Lunt & Farrell, 1994; Webster & Hoyle, 2000). The Department for Education and Skills is currently considering implementing 3 year training, based on the suggestions of the training sub-group of the Educational Psychology Working Group (DfEE, 2000). There appears to be general support for an increase in the training period but, as Frederickson *et al.* (1999) and Webster and Hoyle (2000) note,

this debate has brought to the forefront questions about the skills and knowledge needed by EPs and about how these can best be developed during the training period.

Such developments within the profession have also meant that consideration is now being given to how the Assistant role fits within the overall career structure of Educational Psychologists. The recent document 'Promoting Quality' (Association of Educational Psychologists, 2002) outlines suggestions for a new career structure and proposes six different 'strands' within the profession, each with a clearly defined professional title and an outline of responsibilities. One of the strands is titled 'Educational Psychologist in Training' and it is recommended that it should include Assistants. Although Assistants are not viewed as a distinct element of the profession, they are seen as an element of the training route from teacher to EP.

1.2. An example of an Assistant programme

An example of an Assistant programme will be discussed in order to illustrate some of the themes and issues relating to practice. The author and others implemented this programme in an EP service in September 2001. It continues to operate at the time of writing.

Rationale for the development of the Assistant programme

In retrospect, it is difficult to be clear about the prompts that led to the setting up of this Assistant programme. The employment of Assistants was first raised at a time of significant staffing difficulties and, although this was never explicitly given as a

rationale for the introduction of the programme, it is probable that it played at least some part.

There were also likely to have been other reasons for the introduction of Assistants. Again, these were not made explicit at the time but it is the author's view that the following factors were referred to at the time:

- Improving the quality and range of service delivery to schools
- Increasing the level of direct work in schools
- Developing creative and innovative ways of working
- Easing possible future recruitment difficulties
- Providing useful training experiences for new entrants to the profession

Developing the model

Time was taken to consider the model to be adopted by the service and to look at models already being used elsewhere. A Senior EP attended a training day on 'Developing Quality Standards for Assistant Educational Psychologists' run by the Essex service in March 2000 and a few months later key staff from Essex presented their model at a whole service meeting. This meeting was used as a way to engage the whole service in the idea of developing an Assistant model. Over the next year, Senior EPs developed a model and consulted with the service. EPs were invited to comment on and contribute to the development of the model at all stages.

Outline of the model

By the summer term 2001 a clear model had been developed. The key features of the Assistant programme were as follows:

- *A model of time allocation* – Assistants spent 8 sessions per week on school based work and 2 on support and development work, eg supervision, training and project work.
- *A definition of tasks* – covering areas where Assistants would work independently (eg observations, direct interventions, working with Support Assistants, monitoring pupil progress) and areas where they would work alongside EPs (eg project work, INSET delivery).
- *Mechanisms for supervision and support* – Weekly group supervision with a Senior EP. Day-to-day supervision with a link EP.
- *A protocol for requesting Assistant involvement* – EPs completed a request form detailing the purpose of the activity, expected outcomes, timescale and the support available to the Assistant
- *Procedures for 'reporting back'* – Assistants used the Consultation Record forms used by all EPs but with countersigning by the requesting EP.
- *An initial training and induction period* – a 3 week induction and training period involving a mixture of training sessions and shadowing activities

Full details of the model are included in Appendix 1. An example Request for Assistant Involvement form is provided in Appendix 2.

It was considered vitally important that the model was clearly understood by schools and by others in the LEA. An information summary sheet was therefore developed. This took the form of answers to questions that were likely to be asked by schools (see Appendix 3).

Implementation

Four Assistants took up post in September 2001. Following completion of their initial training period, they began work in schools and worked with the service for

the remainder of the academic year. Three of the four Assistants were successful in securing places on professional training courses in Educational Psychology.

Evaluation

An evaluation of the year's work was carried out by the Assistants in collaboration with a Senior EP. This covered the following areas:

- The Assistants' views on their experiences
- Feedback from EPs via comments and a structured questionnaire
- Feedback from schools via comments and a structured questionnaire

The evaluation is currently in the process of being written up. However, initial indications are that the Assistants had found the experience useful and that they saw it as an important step in their transition from teachers to EPs. Their work was positively evaluated by both schools and EP colleagues. Once the evaluation findings have been collated and published it will be possible to comment more fully on the outcomes.

1.3. Summary

This section has considered the current situation with regard to the role of Assistant EPs. It looked at both the national context and an example of an Assistant programme. There is evidence that this is a developing and expanding role that is considered to be a beneficial addition to service delivery. The next section will consider the research literature on Assistant EP programmes and on learning in the workplace.

2. ASSISTANT EPs: THEORY AND RESEARCH

This review will examine two key areas of the literature:

- The research into current practice with regard to Assistants' work (in particular, the issues related to making the transition to becoming an EP).
- The wider literature on work-based learning.

2.1. The literature on current practice: an overview

Before reviewing this area of the literature, it is important to highlight some of its key shortcomings.

The limited size of the literature base

Firstly, the literature on current practice and issues is extremely small. Reviews of key electronic databases indicate that the term 'assistant educational psychologist' does not commonly occur in research papers. A search of the PsychINFO database produced only two articles linked to the term. Catchword (BPS database), Eric and the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences all found no matches for 'assistant educational psychologist' or 'assistant psychologist'. Many of the articles that discuss the work of Assistants are to be found in professional newsletters or professional journals, rather than the more general psychological literature.

The restricted scope of the literature

Not only is the literature small in size, it is also relatively restricted in scope. Much of the research evidence is based upon the Essex service's Assistant programme and

these accounts certainly provide the clearest descriptions of practice and the best accounts of evaluation. However, the literature on this model suffers from several key limitations:

- It often involves descriptive, personal accounts, although some authors do acknowledge this (e.g. Counsell & Court, 2000).
- It is written by EPs working within the service (e.g. Counsell & Court, 2000; Imich *et al.*, 1999; Lyons, 1999). The lack of external evaluation limits its usefulness.
- Evaluation methods and outcomes are not described in any detail. For example, although Lyons (1999) describes an evaluation of the model, she provides only a very brief description of data collection methods. In another article (Lyons, 2000) she claims that ‘a detailed evaluation’ of the framework has taken place but again provides no details.
- The evaluations are of general models of service delivery, rather than looking specifically at the outcomes of an Assistant programme. Lyons (1999) describes how the Essex model introduced three main components:
 - An annual planning cycle
 - Interventions informed by research
 - Assistants working with EPs

The evaluations do not distinguish between these elements and therefore positive outcomes could be attributable to any or all of the elements.

Bearing these shortcomings in mind, the literature on the work of Assistants will now be considered.

2.2. The role of Assistants

The activities carried out by Assistants

A useful starting point is the survey outlined by Imich and Counsell (2000). They describe an unpublished review of the work carried out by Assistants in an number of services (how many is not clear). Services were asked to identify tasks carried out from a list of 20 possibilities. The results of the survey can be summarised as follows:

Activities carried out by all Assistants	Observations, assessments and intervention work in mainstream schools
Activities carried out by nearly all Assistants	Planning interventions with teachers; work in secondary schools; work with pupils with EBD.
Activities least likely to be carried out by Assistants	Writing psychological advice; working with post-16 pupils
Activities in which Assistants did not engage	None from the list presented

Imich and Counsell conclude that there is a degree of variability in the role across services and that some services have a much more clearly defined range of activities than others.

More detailed descriptions of activities are provided by various accounts of the Essex model. Lyons (1999, 2000) stresses that a key feature of this particular model is the clear distinction in roles between Assistants and EPs. However, when we look at the different accounts of the Assistant role in this service (Counsell & Court, 2000; Lyons 1999, 2000) it is still hard to gain a consistent view of the activities carried out. It is difficult to compare these accounts, as they look at the Assistant roles from

slightly different perspectives and using different levels of description. However, in all of them there is an emphasis on:

- Work in schools.
- Work with teaching assistants and teachers.
- Assessment, discussion, feedback and planning in relation to pupils.

The differences in these accounts may not be surprising given the different perspectives of the writers and the fact that, as Lyons (1999) notes, the role has developed as the model has been applied.

In the Essex model there is also an emphasis on direct work in schools. Lyons (2000) points out that the Assistants spend most of their time in schools with minimal time on 'reflection and admin'. Imich *et al.* (1999) describe how Assistants deliver a service to all secondary schools and 60% of primary schools. No further detail is given on how their time is allocated, although Lyons (1999) indicates that at least some schools receive a specific allocation of Assistants' time.

The outcomes for services

Imich and Counsell (2000) outline the reasons why services may choose to employ Assistants. They list:

- Overcoming recruitment difficulties
- Enhancing service delivery
- Helping the Assistant to gain knowledge and experience.

Clearly, two of these relate directly to benefits to the service, and these will be discussed in more detail in this section.

Overcoming recruitment difficulties:

In their survey of services, Imich and Counsell (2000) found that some Assistants were employed in services experiencing staffing difficulties. Similarly, in her description of the Essex model, Lyons (2000) noted that the introduction of Assistants had helped to address concerns regarding recruitment.

Enhancing service delivery:

Much of the research carried out in relation to the Essex model has focused on the ways in which Assistants have enhanced service delivery. Descriptions of these findings can be summarised as follows:

Imich <i>et al.</i> (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 33% increase in total school visit time• EPs more able to apply 'higher-level psychological skills'• 76% of schools felt Assistant role was 'helpful' or 'very helpful'
Lyons (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• EPs working with Assistants achieved more effective outcomes• 76% of schools felt Assistant role was 'helpful' or 'very helpful'• 70% of EPs thought working with an Assistant was 'helpful' or 'very helpful'• Schools, EPs and Assistants responded positively• Assistants 'add value' for individuals and schools
Imich and Counsell (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 98% and 96% respectively found the work of the Assistant either 'very helpful or quite helpful'• Schools valued observations, training, assistance with IEPs, help with literacy, stage 3 support• More effective time allocation and better prioritising of work• Better communication between school and EP service
Lyons (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools receive more visits• More structured planning and review with schools, increased involvement in project work, broader use of consultation, development of supervision skills for EPs

There is little or no mention of any problems or drawbacks. The only exception appears to be Lyons (1999) who cautions that increased joint working between EPs and Assistants could lead to EPs feeling ‘undervalued, de-skilled or overworked’. As discussed at the start of this literature review, this research into the effectiveness of Assistants is subject to many shortcomings and it is therefore difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the effectiveness of Assistants.

Training and support provided by services

In considering the role of Assistant EPs, several authors have stressed the importance of providing Assistants with suitable training experiences. Imich *et al.* (1999) claim that the quality of training is crucial to the success of Assistant programmes. Imich and Counsell (2000) suggest the use of quality standards for Assistant training and Frederickson (1999) suggests that training experiences offered by services should be accredited. However, an examination of the current literature indicates that, at the current time, training is often on a more informal basis.

In their review of the training provided by services for Assistants, Imich and Counsell (2000) noted that there were two distinct divisions:

- In services with a clear role and task definition for the Assistants the services typically provided at least 10 days structured induction and training.
- In other services, Assistants received little induction and training.

Looking at descriptions of the training provided in Essex, there does appear to be a clear model. Several authors (e.g. Counsell & Court, 2000; Lyons, 2000) have described the following elements of this training:

- An initial 2 week training period
- Monthly training days followed by an Assistant quality circle
- EPS training days
- Base training and support
- Support and advice from patch EPs
- Termly review with Senior EP and annual professional development review

Unlike many of the writers, Lyons (2000) discusses the content of this training in some detail, and notes that the overall aim is to enable the Assistants to begin to carry out their role quickly whilst avoiding areas that they would later cover on professional training courses.

In summary, it appears that it is generally considered important that Assistants receive induction and training experiences. The focus is on enabling them to carry out the tasks related to their work as Assistants.

The benefits for Assistants

This is an area where more has been written, possibly because it touches on the current debate over training and the potential benefits of extending the period of professional training. This section therefore draws not only on the accounts of those involved in Assistant programmes, it also includes the views of those interested in the wider debate about the future of professional training.

Several authors have commented on the shortcomings of current training routes. For example, Farrell and Lunt (1995) note that it is difficult to cover the curriculum in sufficient depth and breadth and comment that the training for EPs consists of ‘many

disconnected hurdles'. Similarly, Webster *et al.* (2000) suggest that there may be a poor fit between current training routes and the demands of the job and Lyons (2000) notes that it is evident that one year training courses 'are not sufficient to prepare EPs for the multiple, varied and changing roles demanded'.

However, despite these suggestions it is worth noting that the evidence may be slightly different. Webster *et al.* (2000) surveyed new entrants to the profession and concluded that only a small minority felt unprepared when they started work as an EP. The picture is therefore far from clear.

Training and Assistants:

Several authors have suggested changes to current training routes, some of which involve a period working as an Assistant. For example, Kerfoot and Imich (2000) propose a new training route with 4 stages, with one of the stages called Assistant (Educational) Psychologist. Others (e.g. Lyons, 1999) focus more on extended placements for trainees as the likely way forward. Such suggestions link closely with the proposals to introduce the new model of professional training discussed in section 1.

A useful survey in clarifying how EPs themselves perceive these developments was carried out by Frederickson *et al.* (1999). As part of a wider survey of views on skills and training, EPs were asked how skills and knowledge could best be acquired between gaining a first degree in psychology and entering professional training. Work as a 'graduate assistant' was chosen by 39.1% of respondents, and this is proposed as a way of developing training routes.

A useful account of the value of Assistant work is provided by Counsell and Court (2000), who describe their own experiences as Assistants. They conclude that despite some difficulties (which they do not describe in detail) it was a positive learning experience. Interestingly, this is one of the few accounts of Assistant programmes which stresses the learning outcomes for the Assistants themselves and, as such, it is useful in informing the role that the experience could play in training. They summarise their key areas of learning as follows:

- Developing a 'thorough and realistic' view of the role of the EP
- Developing a knowledge of current issues within the profession
- Observing and contributing to the process of applying psychology

Motivation and Enjoyment:

Imich and Counsell (2000) and Counsell and Court (2000) stress the benefits reported by Assistants in terms of motivation, confidence and preparation for training as EPs. Lyons (2000) is slightly more cautious in her summary, claiming that experiences as Assistants enabled participants to make an informed choice about undertaking professional training.

Securing a place on a training course:

In the accounts of the Essex Assistant programme, this is emphasised as one of the key benefits. Imich and Counsell (2000) claim that the effectiveness of Assistant posts needs to be measured by the level of success in securing a funded training place. Indeed, the Essex Assistants are reported to have been very successful in this respect. In 1999 all 5 are reported to have secured a place (Imich *et al.*, 1999; Lyons,

2000) and in 2000 all 11 gained places (Imich & Counsell, 2000). Lyons (2000) goes on to note that this is an important attraction when people apply for Assistant posts, although no evidence is provided for this assertion.

In summary, there is evidence that the role of Assistant could be considered as part of a training route from teacher to EP. Some authors have also suggested that it could provide a more useful training experience than the requirement for experience as a teacher.

2.3. Workplace learning

This section looks at the literature on learning within the workplace, as this has relevance if the Assistant role is viewed as part of a training process. In contrast to the previous section, this literature is theoretical rather than evidence based. Some writers (e.g. Bould & Solomon, 2001; Evans, 2001) base their conclusions on personal experience but for others their evidence base is not clear. The literature is also divorced from the psychological literature on learning, although there are some exceptions to this (e.g. Cornford, 1997).

Despite these shortcomings, there is a large body of literature in this area. Garrick (1998) claimed that there had been a 'massive growth' in writing and research on work-based learning over the previous 10 years. He noted that this type of learning was increasingly being promoted as a valid way of acquiring knowledge and the most meaningful way to gain work-based skills. Evans (2001) describes how changes in higher education in the UK during the 1980s led to the introduction of

work-place learning into the academic arena. Similarly, Bould and Solomon (2001) describe a 'general vocationalisation' of courses and a blurring of the boundaries between learning in the workplace and in the formal setting over the previous decade.

However, although there has been an increase in writing promoting work-based learning, there are some writers who are more cautious. For example, Marsick and Watkins (1990) review the literature and conclude that learning from experience is often lauded but that there is still much debate about how it operates.

Apprenticeship models of work-based learning

The traditional model of apprenticeship, as described by Guile and Young (1999), uses a combination of formal and informal learning processes to help learners move into specific occupations. They stress that it uses a transmission model of learning and that, although it has traditionally been associated with crafts and industry, it does not have to be restricted to the traditional range of professions.

Rikowski (1999) develops the concept of apprenticeship further and outlines three different types of apprenticeship, reflecting a change in emphasis from the 1930s to the present time:

Classical Apprenticeship

Time serving; observing the master and doing; indentures laying out rights and duties of each side; specialised training in a trade

Modern Apprenticeship

Training to standards of craftsmanship; day release for college based training; contract of employment; formal qualifications – results orientated; some flexibility/ training in other trades

Post-modern Apprenticeship

NVQ levels; flexibility through customised NVQs; importance of core transferable skills; the context of lifelong learning

Rikowski describes how ‘post-modern apprentices learn unto death’ (ie mastery is never attained) and concludes that this fits well with modern ideas of equipping people for rapidly changing employment contexts where flexibility and adaptability are the key factors.

Models of apprenticeship also fit comfortably with the psychological literature on learning as a social process. Smith *et al.* (1998) provide a useful overview of this literature, describing how the ideas of Vygotsky and Bruner have promoted the social aspects of learning. Of particular relevance is the concept of ‘scaffolding’, through which a more expert peer assists the learner to achieve more than they could alone, through the use of strategies such as modelling, task structuring, comments and encouragement.

Informal aspects of work-based learning

Work-based learning has often been described as a type of informal learning, as contrasted with more formal classroom based learning situations. Marsick and Watkins (1990) outline the informal aspects of learning as follows.

- typically not classroom based or structured
- control is in hands of learner
- includes incidental learning
- takes place without organisation and as part of everyday experience
- includes learning from mistakes, learning by doing and through interpersonal relationships
- can take place anywhere and at any time
- experience based, non-routine and often tacit.

They claim that this type of learning is needed most when individuals experience situations that are non-routine, as learned responses are likely to be less helpful. They discuss the growing recognition that workplace learning will require increasingly informal learning processes, as this type of learning is more relevant to the problem situations in which modern workers find themselves. Similarly, Garrick (1998) stresses the importance of informal learning in the workplace, suggesting that there are rich sources of learning in everyday situations that can often be the starting point for more formal 'courses'.

However, this is not to say that all writers stress the importance of informal over formal learning in the workplace. Guile and Young (1999) note that more recent evidence suggests that employers are increasingly also asking for more formal types of knowledge, due to the changing nature of industry. They call for a new view of

apprenticeship that combines informal 'learning by doing' with more formal types of knowledge.

Social and emotional aspects of workplace learning

In contrast to traditional models of apprenticeship, which see mastery as developing within 'a closed social sphere' of apprentice and master (Rikowski, 1999), more modern perspectives stress the importance of the interaction between apprentice and a network of experienced people (e.g. Boud & Solomon, 2001; Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Guile and Young (1999) take this further and conceptualise apprenticeship as a social learning process that socialises workers into a specific workplace and occupation.

Marsick and Watkins (1990) outline in some detail the social element of work-placed learning. They describe how 'workplace learning involves a social contract among individuals who work together to achieve higher-order organisational skills'. Social networks are seen as playing a key role in the process because learners in the workplace are bound into social groups that are connected by common organisational goals.

There is little mention in the literature of the emotional aspects of work-based learning but Marsick and Watkins (1990) make an interesting suggestion with regard to good practice. They state that 'the successful integration of the affective with the cognitive' is the key to successful adult learning. They claim that workplace experiences produce emotional responses and that learners are often left to deal with their emotions without support. Boud and Solomon (2001) also touch on emotional

aspects in their discussion on the shift from academic to work-based learning experiences for university students. They note that this can appear a very attractive option to students (managing their own learning, less university attendance) but that the increased freedom and difficulty of being both a worker and learner can lead to problems for some. As a result they suggest that the degree of flexibility should be 'located and bounded'.

Workplace versus academic learning

Boud and Solomon (2001) describe how work-based learning can be 'seductive' to universities because it enables them to be collaborators rather than competitors with employing organisations. However, they also outline some of the challenges that work-based learning can present for academic institutions. In summary, these include:

- How to fit workplace learning into the normal trajectory of academic study:
Currently, formal knowledge rather than informal learning is the starting point for work-based learning.
- How to allocate the right to decide the scope of learning experiences:
Currently this still resides with universities and they are seen as the 'primary producers of knowledge'. However, true work-based learning starts in the workplace and therefore academics may no longer have the sole right to decide what is to be learnt and how.
- How to maintain academic 'standards':
A major challenge revolves around notions of academic standards, as there is often concern about the lowering of standards with workplace learning. The challenge is to integrate the two types of learning, not to apply the same criteria as for conventional awards.
- The role of the academic:
They call for a very different role for the academic – one of a 'facilitator in learning rather than an expert in a discipline'.

In considering the relationship between work-based and academic learning situations, it is important to set this within the context of current developments in the vocational training. Cornford (1997) discusses the move towards modular courses in higher education, through which work experience may be interspersed by more formal learning 'modules', each consisting of a discrete learning area. He cautions against this approach, claiming that it does not promote integrated knowledge acquisition and suggests that such courses should include elements which help students to consciously make links between aspects of their learning, including those between their academic and workplace learning.

Evans (2001) also discusses the changing role of universities. Although his work is based on his own experience, he does provide examples changes in practice over the past two decades. He claims that work-based learning has become increasingly accepted by academics but says this has sometimes been grudgingly. He goes on to suggest that the challenge for higher education is to convert the current acceptance of work place learning into a fuller understanding.

3. INTEGRATION OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

This section will reconsider the Assistant programme described earlier in light of the literature on both Assistant programmes and work-based learning.

3.1. How did the Assistant programme relate to those described in the literature?

The activities carried out by the Assistants

The activities carried out by the Assistants related quite closely to those described in the survey by Imich and Counsell (2000) and the descriptions of the Essex programme (Counsell & Court, 2000; Lyons, 2000). There was also a clearly defined role for Assistants, as described by Lyons (1999, 2000).

However, there were some ways in which the programme differed. Firstly, although the emphasis was undoubtedly on work in schools in relation to assessment and intervention, there was also an emphasis on project work. Project work is not mentioned in the literature, although Counsell and Court (2000) do mention evaluating an intervention package. In the author's view, it is likely that the explicit role of project work in the programme described was a reflection on the prominence of project work for all EPs within this particular service.

Secondly, in the descriptions of the Essex model there was an emphasis on direct service delivery, with minimal time on reflection and administrative tasks. This was also true of the Assistant programme described, but there may have been slightly more time spent on supervision and support. This raises some interesting questions about the need for such time, if the experiences of Assistants are to be framed within the context of a learning process (discussed in more detail later in the assignment).

Outcomes for the service

It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the outcomes for the service at this stage, as the evaluation of the Assistant programme is not yet complete. However, as in some of the services described by Imich and Counsell (2000), one of the reasons for employing Assistants was to overcome staffing and recruitment difficulties.

There was also an emphasis on improving service delivery to schools, as described in most of the accounts of the Essex model. Initial indications are that, as with the Essex model, schools have responded favourably to the work of the Assistants.

However, the forthcoming evaluation will be important in providing more robust information on outcomes.

Training and support offered by the service

The clear induction and training programme linked very closely to those found in some services, including the Essex service (e.g. Imich & Counsell, 2000; Lyons, 2000). The weekly group supervision sessions with a senior EP may have reflected the increased emphasis on this type of support compared with the the Essex model. However, it is also possible that the Essex monthly training sessions fulfilled many of the same functions as the supervision sessions. As in the Essex model, the focus of induction and training was to enable Assistants to carry out their tasks. There was less emphasis on training and support in relation to their path towards becoming an EP. Certain supervision sessions did cover more ongoing issues, e.g. a session on applying for professional training courses, but training and support was generally not considered within a framework of transition from teacher to EP. Once again, this has implications if we are to consider work as an Assistant as part of a training route towards qualification as an EP.

The benefits for Assistants

In the literature, there have been suggestions that the role of the Assistant could be seen as part of the training path from teacher to EP (Frederickson *et al.*, 1999; Kerfoot & Imich, 2000), particularly in light of proposed changes to EP training.

Three of the four Assistants in the service went on to train as EPs and informal feedback from all four indicated that they had found their year enjoyable and beneficial. This is very much in line with the conclusions of those in Essex. The fact that one of the Assistants did not go on to professional training may add support to Lyon's (2000) claim that experiences as an Assistant may enable participants to make more informed choices about whether to train. However, it may also raise questions about the effectiveness of the Assistants' experiences, given the claim by Imich and Counsell (2000) that the success of programmes should ultimately be measured by the success at securing a place on a training course.

Whether the experience as an Assistant will prove useful to the three Assistants currently on training courses is not yet clear. The personal recollections of Counsell and Court (2000) indicated that they had found the experience helpful once they had become EPs. However, in the literature as a whole, the focus has been on the outcomes for services rather than outcomes for the Assistants themselves. It would be useful to gather information from the three Assistants once they complete their training in order to see how they then perceived its benefits and whether, as Frederickson *et al.* (1999) suggest, it strengthened their psychological skills and knowledge. If work as an Assistant is to be a useful learning experience it is vital

that we focus not only on the outcomes for services but also on the outcomes for the Assistants themselves.

3.2. How did the Assistant programme relate to the literature on work-based learning?

Assistants and apprenticeship

There are many similarities between the role of the Assistant and the description of post-modern apprentices offered by Rikowski (1999). The Assistant post could be viewed as part of a learning path through which the core, transferable skills and knowledge of educational psychology are acquired. This model of apprenticeship also fits well with notions of ongoing professional development in the workplace throughout an EP's career. The application of apprenticeship models to the Assistant role allows us to see it as a legitimate form of workplace learning that is part of a career-long workplace learning process. However, it is true to say that, in practice, the apprenticeship aspects of Assistants' roles were often overshadowed by the importance of pragmatic rationales about service delivery and benefits for the service.

Assistant EPs and informal learning

The learning experiences of the Assistants had many of the features of informal workplace learning described by Marsick and Watkins (1990). Despite the inclusion of an initial training period and on-going supervision, much of the learning is likely to have taken place through day-to-day experience within schools and the service.

The provision of regular supervision and support allowed this knowledge to be

linked to more formal knowledge in the way that Guile and Young (1999) suggest for new forms of apprenticeship.

It is, however, difficult to gauge the role that informal learning played for the Assistants, due to the current lack of evaluation data. It would also be interesting to know whether the Assistants and the EPs perceived the work as an important informal learning experience or whether the emphasis was still on the more formal 'training and supervision' sessions as the main way of acquiring skills and knowledge. Marsick and Watkins (1990) note that little is known about how informal learning operates in the workplace, and this was definitely true for the Assistant programme.

Assistants and the social/emotional aspects of workplace learning

It is likely that the strong collegiate ethos of the EP service promoted these aspects of learning for the Assistants. Once again, no direct evidence is available, but the Assistants certainly had access to EPs who could scaffold learning and provide the types of support described in the newer models of apprenticeship (e.g. Boud & Solomon, 2001; Marsick & Watkins, 1990). The nature of the service and, in particular, the project work within the service, meant that EPs were used to working collaboratively. This fits well with models of learning that view apprenticeship as an opportunity to become socialised into a profession (Guile & Young, 1999).

If, as Marsick and Watkins (1990) suggest, the integration of emotional aspects is key to effective adult learning, then EP services would seem to be ideally placed to offer the support learners need to cope with the emotional demands of workplace

learning. The demands of flexibility described by Boud and Solomon (2001) are likely to have been eased for the Assistants because of their clearly defined role and tasks. The weekly supervision sessions allowed each Assistant to discuss their positive and negative experiences from the previous week within a supportive group setting. However, this form of support was mainly restricted to the supervision sessions and it is questionable whether, as a whole service, priority was given to offering the Assistants the emotional support they needed in order to cope with the demands of a new workplace. Having four Assistants undoubtedly helped in this respect, as they were able to offer support to each other on a day to day basis. Arguably, being a single Assistant within the service would have been a difficult experience.

Learning in the workplace and learning on EP training courses

The literature stresses the benefits of greater collaboration between universities and workplaces. Such collaboration is already well established within educational psychology but the role of Assistants offers new and exciting challenges to training institutions if they are to integrate informal learning into formal courses in the way that Garrick (1998) suggests. The challenges outlined by Boud and Solomon (2001) seem to be relevant to the current situation and will need careful consideration if the experiences of Assistants are to be integrated into training routes. Such developments bring into question issues such as the need to extend the notion of workplace learning beyond current models of service placements and also the need to give consideration to the ways in which workplace and academic learning can be integrated, so as to avoid the type of fragmented learning described by Cornford (1997).

3.3. Conclusions and suggestions for developing the Assistant role

This review of research and practice suggests that Assistant programmes, such as the one described, could usefully be viewed as part of a training route from teacher to EP. Several authors (Frederickson *et al.*, 1999; Imich *et al.*, 1999; Kerfoot and Imich, 2000) have also suggested that the role of Assistant could represent a development to the current training situation. This assignment suggests that we can learn much about the potential of such developments by reconsidering the role as a form of apprenticeship. As such, the work of the Assistant would be underpinned by the principles of work-based learning. The learning outcomes for Assistants and the benefits for services could then be given equal status.

However, if the role of the Assistant is to be reconsidered as a form of apprenticeship, this assignment indicates that further work is needed in the following areas:

- ◇ Information is needed on practice across a wider range of services
- ◇ There needs to be more vigorous evaluation of Assistant programmes, with clear methodology, data analysis and recording of findings
- ◇ Evaluations need to focus not only on the outcomes for services but also the outcomes for Assistants themselves
- ◇ Evaluations need to pay particular attention to the learning outcomes for Assistants, eg
 - What do they learn from their workplace experiences?
 - How does this learning fit with subsequent training?
 - What helps Assistants learn effectively in the workplace?

Despite the shortcomings of the current literature, it is possible to make some initial suggestions about ways of developing the Assistant role to incorporate notions of post-modern apprenticeship:

- ◇ Services should focus energies on promoting outcomes for Assistants as well as those for service delivery.
- ◇ Assistants should have protected time for supervision and reflection.
- ◇ Training and support should focus not only on immediate work-related concerns but also on the learning path towards becoming an EP.
- ◇ Services and Assistants need to be aware of the importance of informal learning experiences in the workplace
- ◇ Services should foster social learning experiences by promoting team working with Assistants within a collaborative service culture
- ◇ Consideration needs to be given to having groups of Assistants within services in order to promote peer support and group learning
- ◇ Assistants should be offered support to cope with the emotional demands of workplace learning.
- ◇ Services should offer explicit opportunities to integrate workplace learning with more formal learning experiences.
- ◇ Training courses should consider ways of recognising the learning experiences of Assistants and integrating these into the more academic learning on courses.

4. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This assignment has examined the role of Assistants through examination of a particular Assistant programme and with reference to the wider literature on the work

of Assistants. The programme fitted quite closely with practice described in the literature.

The assignment also looked at the Assistants' role with reference to the literature on work-based learning and it is suggested that work as an Assistant could usefully be considered as a form of apprenticeship.

Suggestions have been made for developing the Assistant role as a form of apprenticeship. However, there is a need for further, more rigorous, examination and evaluation of the learning aspects of the Assistants' work.

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APPENDIX 1

ASSISTANT EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS Guidelines September 2001

Model of Working/ time allocation

- The Assistant EPs will spend 8 sessions a week working in schools. This includes work the Assistant will carry out independently and work they will carry out alongside EPs eg project work and INSET in schools.

School based work	Support and development work
Assisting in casework, INSET and project work in schools	Supervision, training and development activities. 'Service level' project and development work, eg work on the inclusion project
8 sessions per week	2 sessions per week

Areas of work

The Assistant EPs will be able to carry out work in the following areas:

- * Carrying out initial data collection/ observations/ checklists/ literacy and numeracy assessments
- * Supporting specific interventions for pupils, eg social skills training, anger management, circle of friends
- * Helping schools in writing IEPs, PSPs, PEPs etc
- * Advising Learning Support Assistants in their work with pupils
- * Monitoring and evaluating pupil progress and the outcomes of interventions
- * Writing summaries/ consultation forms following these activities

- * Working alongside EPs on research and project work
- * Working alongside EPs planning, delivering and evaluating INSET

Supervision and Support

- Overall responsibility for supervision and line management will be held by the Senior EP(s) with responsibility for Assistant EPs. The Senior EP (Research and Development) will meet with the Assistants for weekly group supervision meetings (Fridays). The Senior EP (Course Director UCL) will meet with them on a half-termly basis to provide supervision in relation to the wider context of EP work and issues relating to training.
- Each Assistant will be allocated to a group of EPs, one of whom will act as a day-to-day supervisor. Supervisors will be responsible for day-to-day support and guidance in relation to work in schools. Any significant issues should be referred onto the Senior EP.
- Supervising EPs should arrange brief weekly meetings with their Assistant, in order to maintain an overview of their work in schools.
- Individual EPs can make requests for work directly to their link Assistant. EPs who request Assistant EP involvement in a particular piece of work will be

responsible for checking and countersigning any summaries/consultation forms that are sent to school.

Requesting the involvement of an Assistant EP

- When requests are made for Assistant EP involvement, it will be important to include only those tasks included in the list above.
- Planning meetings will be the main way in which pieces of work are allocated to the Assistants. Where possible, the Assistants will accompany EPs to planning meetings in those schools where there is most likely to be a need for their involvement.
- However, it is also likely that requests for work will arise between planning meetings, as a result of EPs' work in schools over the term. There may also be requests for involvement from planning meetings where an Assistant was not present. In these cases, requests can be made directly to the Assistant EP via discussion and a completed request form.
- When requests are made for Assistant EP involvement it will be important for EPs to make clear:
 - the purpose and nature of the activity
 - the expected outcomes
 - the timescale
 - the name of a contact person in school (usually the SENCO) and the names of any other key members of staff
 - the support and guidance available

The requesting EP will need to complete a request form and agree the involvement through discussion with the Assistant.

Reporting back on work completed

- Once they have completed a piece of work, the Assistant EPs will return their consultation form and any file notes to the requesting EP. The requesting EP will then check through the consultation form and either countersign it ready for sending to school, or return to the Assistant for modification. No consultation forms should be sent to schools without countersigning by the requesting EP.
- Each Assistant EP will also keep a personal work log. This will include a record of work requested and reflections on their learning as Assistant EPs. It would be helpful if the Assistants could bring this log to meetings with their supervisor and to the weekly meetings with the Senior EP.

Initial training and induction

- The format for work in the first half-term will be slightly different to that in subsequent terms, to allow for induction and initial training. In September, the new Assistants will have a 3 week induction and training period. They will begin work in schools in the 4th week of term. As part of their induction they will accompany EPs on planning meetings and shadow them on visits during the second week of term.

APPENDIX 2
REQUEST FOR ASSISTANT EP INVOLVEMENT FORM

**Request for Assistant Educational Psychologist's
Involvement**

To be completed by the requesting Educational Psychologist

Pupil/Issue:		
School:		
Summary of work requested:		
No of sessions likely to be needed:		
Timescale/work to be completed by:		
Contact person(s) in school:		
Requesting EP:		Date:

Discussed with Assistant EP on:	
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Completed forms to be copied to pupil's file and Assistant EP's work log

APPENDIX 3

INFORMATION FOR SCHOOLS

ASSISTANT EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Information for schools

Why do we need Assistant EPs?

- To enhance service delivery to schools
- To provide Assistants with skills and experiences which will prepare them for their professional training year and future careers as Educational Psychologists

The Educational Psychology service will have four Assistant EPs from September 2001.

What training and experience do the Assistant EPs have?

All our Assistants have a degree in psychology, a teaching qualification and at least 2 years experience as a teacher. They will work with the service for 1-2 years before going on to complete their professional training as EPs.

How will the Assistants' time be used?

All the Assistants will complete an initial 3 week training period. They will also have on-going supervision, support and development activities. The main focus of their work will be direct work with schools.

School based work	<i>Support and development work</i>
Assisting in casework, INSET and project work in schools	Supervision, training and development activities. 'Service level' project and development work
4 days per week	1 day per week

What types of work can Assistants do in schools?

The Assistants will be able to carry out the following activities:

- Carrying out initial data collection/ observations/ checklists/ literacy and numeracy assessments
- Supporting specific interventions for pupils eg social skills training, anger management, circle of friends
- Helping schools in writing IEPs, PSPs, PEPs etc
- Advising Learning Support Assistants in their work with pupils
- Monitoring and evaluating pupil progress and the outcomes of interventions
- Writing summaries following these activities
- Working alongside EPs on research and project work
- Working alongside EPs planning, delivering and evaluating INSET
- Attending school planning meetings with EPs
- Shadowing EPs

How does an Assistant become involved in work in a school?

Each Assistant EP will be allocated to a group of EPs, and will carry out work in those EPs' schools. Assistant EPs will become involved in work with individual pupils/ groups of pupils/ project work following a request from a school's EP.

How will the Assistants' work be evaluated?

The service will be evaluating the Assistant EP programme in order to develop the service to schools.

ASSIGNMENT 3

**NURTURE-BASED APPROACHES WITHIN ORDINARY
SCHOOL SETTINGS: CAN THE NURTURE GROUP MODEL BE
ADAPTED?**

ABSTRACT

This assignment considers the relevance of the nurture group model to more flexible, individualised programmes of support. The nurture group approach has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in recent times and despite the lack of clarity in the literature, it is generally considered a very effective intervention for children experiencing Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. The assignment considers an intervention based on the 'classic' nurture group model designed for a Year 1 pupil who was experiencing significant behaviour difficulties. The nurture group principles underpinning the intervention are discussed, along with the variations from the 'classic' model. The success of the intervention indicates that the principles of nurture groups can be applied to more individualised interventions.

AIMS AND SCOPE OF THIS ASSIGNMENT

This assignment begins with an overview of current issues in relation to Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD), an area where there has been increasing focus in recent times. It then considers nurture groups as a strategy to support certain children experiencing EBD. The historical development of the groups is reviewed, along with the evidence for a recent resurgence in interest in the approach.

An intervention programme based on the principles of nurturing is then described.

This is not a nurture group but an individualised nurturing programme firmly grounded in the principles and practices of nurture groups. The rationale for setting up the programme, the programme details, the process of implementation and the evaluation process are all discussed.

In the next section, the literature on intervention strategies for EBD is reviewed, with a focus on approaches based on psychodynamic views of behaviour. This then leads onto a more detailed consideration of the literature on nurture groups and their outcomes.

In the last section, the particular nurturing programme is considered in light of the literature. The programme is placed within an overall framework for interventions related to EBD and is considered in terms of its relevance to the practice and outcomes of nurture groups. Finally, the implications for the adaptability of the nurture group model are considered.

The assignment has several key aims:

- 1. To review current issues in relation to strategies to support pupils with EBD**
 - Current issues in EBD
 - Supporting pupils with EBD: nurture groups

- 1. To consider an example of an intervention programme based on the principles of nurture groups**
 - The nurturing programme

- 2. To consider the literature in relation to nurture group interventions**
 - Conceptualisations of EBD
 - Group-based interventions
 - Nurture groups

- 3. To consider the nurturing programme in relation to the practice outlined in the literature, with particular reference to the following questions:**
 - Where did it fit within the framework of interventions for EBD?
 - Did it follow the principles and practice of a nurture group?
 - How did the outcomes compare with those of nurture groups?
 - and to use this information to draw conclusions about the adaptability of the nurture group model.

1. CURRENT ISSUES IN RELATION TO STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT PUPILS WITH EBD

1.1. Current issues relating to EBD: an overview

There is a general perception that emotional and behavioural difficulties are increasing in prevalence amongst children in schools, and that children are entering schools with difficulties that teachers find hard to manage (Bishop & Swain, 2000; Iszatt & Wasilewska, 1997). However, although much is said about the increase in

such difficulties, it is not often that such claims are linked to clear evidence. A useful study in this respect was carried out by Long and Fogell (1999) who looked at the pattern of exclusions from schools. They note that it is difficult to gain very reliable data but conclude that there was a sharp rise in exclusions in the early 1990s and a steadier rise during the late '90s. More recently, Lines (2003) has reviewed exclusion rates and also notes the rise in both formal and informal exclusions (e.g. managed moves to a new school).

Given this evidence, it would appear that schools are finding it difficult to manage the needs of children with EBD. Indeed, recent legislation such as the green paper *Excellence for all children: meeting special educational needs* (DfEE, 1997) and the subsequent *Meeting special educational needs: a programme of action* (DfEE, 1998) acknowledge the complexities of working with children with such difficulties. Swinson, Woof & Melling (2003) note that most responses to the green paper supported the concept of inclusion but that many expressed concerns about its relevance to EBD. Similarly, Bennathan (1997) notes difficulties in increasing the inclusion of children with EBD but suggests that, rather than being due to an increase in the difficulties experienced by children, this may be due to contextual factors (e.g. poor classroom management, lower teacher tolerance, increased union and press publicity). This view is supported by Gray (2002) who comments on the conflicting pressures in the field of EBD, including the government's inclusion agenda and the increased emphasis on children and parents' rights.

Most recently, there has been a shift of emphasis from EBD towards the notion of supporting children's mental health. This is reflected in the document *Promoting*

children's mental health within early years and school settings (DES, 2001) which stresses the importance of an approach based on promoting the mental health of all children, not just those experiencing difficulties.

1.2. Supporting pupils with EBD: nurture groups

Nurture groups have been suggested as one way in which certain pupils experiencing EBD can be supported in school. The overall aim of a nurture group is to provide 'a structured and predictable environment in which the children can begin to trust adults and to learn' (DfEE, 1997). The approach can be characterised by the following features:

- The emphasis is on contextual factors and the children's previous experiences.
- Early nurture, particularly between parent and child, is seen as key to future development. The groups aim to recreate early secure parenting and attachment in school settings.
- The groups are run in ordinary schools (approx. 12 children with a teacher and assistant) and the children attend for 3 - 4 terms.
- The environment and activities recreate elements of the home situation, e.g. physical comfort, reassurance, food, adult care, boundaries and routines.
- Children are allowed to function at a developmentally younger age, so that they can build the foundations for future development.
- There is supportive but firm control from adults who offer clear and consistent behaviour boundaries, as needed by younger children

Nurture groups are not a new approach. Marjorie Boxall, an Educational Psychologist with the Inner London Education Authority, set up the first groups and her approach is outlined in her booklet *The nurture group in the primary school* (Boxall, 1976). The booklet describes how the approach was 'evolved experimentally' from her own experiences and gives details of the groups. Bennathan (1997) comments on the importance of this booklet in disseminating the approach amongst schools and claims that by the late 1970s approximately 50 mainstream schools had nurture groups.

It appears that, after this initial enthusiasm and with the dissolution of the Inner London Education Authority, nurture groups became less popular, although certain London boroughs (e.g. Enfield) continued the approach. However, in recent times there has been a resurgence of interest, fostered by endorsement in key documents such as *Excellence for all* (DfEE, 1997) and *Social inclusion: pupil support* (DfEE, 1999). Cooper (2001) terms this renewed interest the 'second flowering' of the approach and estimates that between a third and half of all LEAs currently either have or plan to have groups. Much of this resurgence can be attributed to the work of the Association of Workers for Children with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (AWCEBD). Bennathan (1997) describes how this association has orchestrated a campaign to draw national attention to the groups in recent times. Also of key importance was the publication of a book by Bennathan and Boxall, which provided the first detailed and updated information on the approach (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000). At the time of writing, a national Nurture Group Network has been created to bring together practice across the country and a large

research project is underway at the University of Leicester to look at the national picture of practice and outcomes.

2. AN INTERVENTION PROGRAMME BASED ON THE PRINCIPLES OF NURTURE GROUPS

As part of the author's regular work with a mainstream school, a programme based upon the principles of nurture groups was established. This was an individual programme for a Year 1 pupil who had experienced significant behavioural difficulties since starting school. He had been adopted at a young age, but was now with a supportive and stable family who were working closely with the school. He was being supported full time by a Teaching Assistant (TA) and school had tried a range of support strategies. These had met with only limited success - the pupil was on the brink of permanent exclusion and parents were no longer sending him to school. The school wished to move things forward and were keen to explore new approaches. In discussion with the Educational Psychologist, it became clear that many of the pupil's difficulties related to unsettled early experiences and attachment difficulties and it was therefore agreed that an approach based on nurture groups would be appropriate. Time was taken at the outset to clarify the aims of the programme and to gain the consent of all concerned. The roles of the various professionals in the programme were established and a baseline of behaviour collected (full details of the planning process are contained in Appendix 1). The

programme began in January 2003 and ran until July 2003. In September 2003 the pupil transferred back into his class on a full time basis.

The key aims of the programme were as follows:

- to enable the pupil have a positive, enjoyable experience of school;
- to increase the pupil's time in school to full time attendance;
- to prevent further exclusions;
- to reduce the pupil's anxiety and build his behaviour skills;
- to build his willingness to engage in academic activities;
- to build a positive relationship with a key adult in school and a sense of; belonging to the school community.

2.1 The nurturing programme

The programme contained the following key elements:

- individual sessions with a TA following practical, non-threatening nurturing activities based around topic work;
- an emphasis on making things to share with others and to take home;
- a special area where nurturing activities were carried out;
- a structured timetable to include nurturing sessions with the TA, small group sessions, lessons with the class, and whole school activities.;
- time with the whole class each day;
- an approach where time in school and time in larger group sessions was gradually increased;
- a strong focus on praise, rewards and celebrating achievements;
- a behaviour management programme;
- close teamwork and planning between TA, classteacher and Headteacher;
- careful and flexible planning of the next week's activities;
- lesson by lesson record keeping; and
- weekly monitoring and review with parents and termly review with parents and outside agencies.

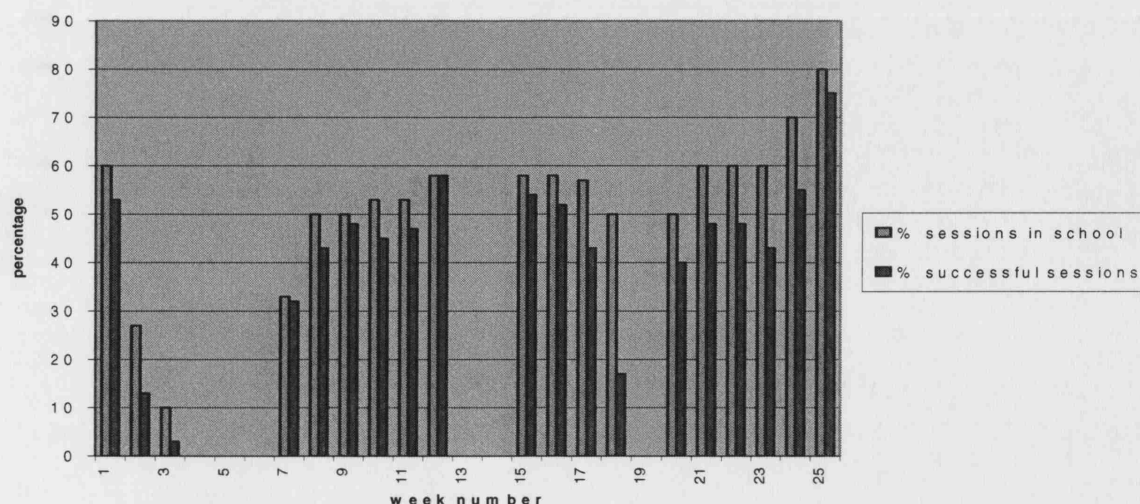
More detailed descriptions of the various elements of the programme are contained in Appendix 2. Details of the monitoring and review processes are given in Appendix 3.

2.2. Evaluating the programme

From the outset it was agreed that it would be important to evaluate the programme and progress was recorded using weekly timetables filled in by the TA. Two evaluation measures were used:

1. *Time in school.* This was expressed as a percentage, derived from the number of sessions the pupil was actually in school compared to the total number of sessions possible.
2. *Successful lessons.* This was expressed as percentage derived from the number of sessions where the pupil remained in the session (i.e. where there were no serious physically aggressive actions) compared to the total number of sessions possible.

The evaluation data is summarised below (the nurture programme started in week 7; weeks 13, 14 and 19 were school holidays).



Prior to the start of the nurturing programme in week 7, there had been a rapid decline in both sessions spent in school and successful sessions, to a point where the pupil was not attending. Over weeks 7-25 the percentage of sessions in school increased, as staff gradually built up the pupil's timetable. Weeks 16 and 17 coincided with a particularly unsettled time for the pupil and so the decision was taken to temporarily reduce the timetable before building it up again. Over weeks 7-25 the percentage of successful sessions also increased, although this was by no means a constant improvement and there were times when the pupil managed only few successful sessions, e.g. week 18. This uneven pattern of improvement may reflect particularly unsettled periods in the child's life. It may also relate to the impact of spending an increased amount of time in school, combined with effects of increasing levels of group and whole class inclusion.

Other indicators of progress

In addition to the evidence obtained from the weekly behaviour records, staff and parents reported other more qualitative indications of improvements. For example, the pupil was reported to be

- more able to talk about his feelings;
- more able to accept warnings and adapt his behaviour;
- happy to come to school;
- more able to accept work being displayed on the wall; and
- less rejecting of more formal or challenging learning tasks.

Changes within the wider school system

From the start, staff at the school valued the pupil as an individual, saw his strengths and were committed to his inclusion within the school community. In the author's view, these values were maintained during the course of the nurture programme.

However, it is the author's view that the nurture programme also contributed to a fundamental shift in understanding about the nature of this pupil's difficulties. It was interesting to see how, in successive review meetings, the focus shifted from dealing with the presenting behaviour difficulties towards a deeper understanding of the underlying issues.

2.3. Ending the programme

After two terms, it was felt that the pupil could reintegrate into the normal classroom setting with support. He was reported to be more willing to produce academic work and, although he continued to experience behaviour difficulties, he was reported to be more confident and was beginning to be able to respond to regular behavioural approaches.

3. THE LITERATURE IN RELATION TO INTERVENTIONS FOR EBD

3.1. Conceptualisations of EBD

The term EBD has many connotations and the label can mean different things to different people (Swinson *et al.*, 2003). It also seems that the meaning of the term

has become less specific over time (Bowers, 2001) and has moved from medically based models to more educational perspectives (Smith & Cooper, 1993). Jones (2003) charts the history of the concept of EBD in education, and although she takes a view of EBD as including only children with very severe difficulties (rather than the broader Code of Practice definition), she does make some interesting points. She also notes the move towards viewing EBD as a learning difficulty, where the goal is to provide support in mainstream settings rather than special ‘treatment’ environments. Several authors (e.g. Bowers, 1996; Gray, 2002; Long & Fogell, 1999) have noted that the emotional element of EBD is often overlooked in favour of behavioural descriptions.

Frederickson and Cline (2002) provide a useful overview of the various theoretical approaches underlying the concept of EBD and the types of intervention that would arise from each standpoint. They identify four main approaches and the interventions related to each, as summarised below:

Approach	Focus	Intervention
Behavioural	Directly observable behaviour and the features of the environment that support behaviour.	Changing the environmental conditions to learn new behaviours.
Cognitive	Cognitive processes and the child’s interpretation of environmental events.	Changing children’s thoughts about themselves and the world.
Psychodynamic	Unconscious wishes, drives and anxieties that drive behaviour.	Understanding and resolving internal conflicts.
Systemic	Reciprocal interactions between individuals’ behaviour, thoughts and environment.	Recognising the effects for everyone in the system and influencing the wider system.

Given the range of conceptualisations of EBD it is perhaps not surprising that there is much debate about what constitutes effective intervention. For example, Lines (2003) notes that many forms of intervention are reactive rather than proactive and calls for more imaginative and pre-emptive approaches built on an understanding of the child. Several other authors (e.g. Bowers, 1996; Long & Fogell, 1999) have called for a greater focus on emotional elements in support programmes. Others (e.g. Bate & Moss, 1997) criticise the 'deviance model' used in interventions and propose the use of a behaviour curriculum in which interventions focus on developing a repertoire of skills.

Psychodynamic approaches to intervention

In a survey of the recommendations for interventions for EBD given by Educational Psychologists in one county over a month, Frederickson and Cline (2002) found that the most frequently recommended approaches were behavioural, cognitive and systemic. They do not give details of this research but it does seem that psychodynamic approaches are not favoured. Frederickson and Cline note that psychodynamic theories often involve cognitive level processes, but stress that the focus is on unconscious beliefs and thoughts that have their roots in the early history of the individual. Nurture groups are an example of a psychodynamic intervention in that they aim to address behaviour difficulties by resolving the child's underlying 'issues', particularly with regard to attachment (Colwell & O'Connor, 2003).

Attachment theory

One of the most comprehensive reviews of the literature on attachment is that by Rutter (1995). In this review, Rutter considers Bowlby's original work on

attachment and its subsequent implications. He describes how, despite an originally hostile reception from psychologists, attachment theory now dominates work on relationships in children and adults, with insecure early attachments seen as leading to later difficulties. Unlike many other reviews of attachment, Rutter helpfully explores some of the unresolved questions around the theory, e.g. the danger of making predictions based on early attachments. Although he is considering attachment from a medical perspective, Rutter does provide a useful and balanced overview.

Recently there appears to have been much discussion between psychologists about whether Bowlby's original model remains relevant. For example, Clarke and Clarke (1998) accept the importance of early emotional experience but suggest that it is less fixed than Bowlby originally proposed, and instead view it as one of a number of steps through the life path. Steele (2002) discusses attachment theory in terms of recent developments in neuroscience and behaviour genetics and concludes that it is still one of the most relevant and powerful accounts of emotional development.

Many of the interventions based on attachment have focused upon programmes for children from mental health personnel (e.g. Glaser, 2000; James, 2003; Svanberg, 1998). In a recent review of the contribution of attachment theory to early intervention in mental health contexts Ziegenhain (2004) describes how attachment theory seems to be useful in practice, although it is noted that there is little empirical evidence of its effectiveness in programmes. Ziegenhain argues strongly for the role of attachment theory in guiding early interventions and describes a clinic-based programme specifically targeting parent-child interaction in very young infants.

Attachment theory has also gained some credence amongst educationalists.

Williams, O'Callaghan & Cowie (1995) provide a particularly useful overview of attachment from the point of view of educationalists, and describe how the theory can provide useful insights into behavioural difficulties in school and school-based interventions. They stress the importance of helping children feel secure and valued in school but do not go into any great detail on interventions, other than a brief mention of counselling approaches. Interestingly, they do not mention any group-based interventions such as nurture groups.

3.2. Group-based approaches to intervention

Before moving on to consider nurture groups in detail, it may be helpful to consider some of the rationales behind group-based interventions for EBD in schools. There appears to be a small literature on the role of group processes in schools, built around concepts from social psychology and the notions that children in a classroom are more than just a collection of individuals (e.g. Schmuck & Schmuck, 1983).

However, the literature on group approaches to EBD is sparse. Lines (2003) describes the practice of placing pupils with EBD in 'sin bin' classes and outlines some of the problems with this approach in terms of poor role-models and the 'negative delinquent group identity' which can ensue. He does stress that he is not talking about groups where children are brought together for 'therapeutic' work but does not go on to explain how these problems would be avoided in such groups.

Long and Fogell (1999) describe support groups as a new way of supporting vulnerable children and cite Boxall and Bennathan's (1996) work on nurture groups as informing effective group-based practice. They go on to look at the key features

in setting up groups, under headings such as learning issues and organisational issues. However, they do not give any guidance on these issues or address the reasons why a group may be more appropriate than individually based interventions. In summary, the rationale for group based interventions for EBD in education is far from clear.

3.3. Nurture groups

Underlying principles

As mentioned previously, nurture groups were first outlined in the booklet by Boxall (1976) and this is a useful starting point for a discussion of their underlying principles. Boxall describes how nurture groups catered for children who had not had the normal experiences of early childhood and therefore did not have the developmental skills to cope in the classroom. Significantly, they had difficulty in accepting the teacher and 'attaching themselves with confidence' – and the groups aimed to improve this:

The approach is essentially an educational one for it is forward looking and is concerned, not with problems, but with growth and the conditions which facilitate growth (Boxall, 1976, p.12)

In this original booklet, Boxall is very clear about the underlying principles of the groups and the role of attachment and development. She focuses on the early stress and disruption that the children have experienced at home as the root of their problems and in this aspect she seems to lay the 'blame' for the difficulties with

parents. However, it is important to consider these comments within the context of that time and, as Bennethan (1997) notes, even the assertion that early difficulties were modifiable challenged many of the beliefs of the time.

These original principles appear to have stood the test of time remarkably well.

Boxall (2002), in her recent book on nurture groups, reviews the underlying values of the groups and the areas she discusses are very much in line with the original principles. The overall focus is still on building early attachments and the replication of early carer-child interactions. Growth not pathology remains an explicit central tenet in this recent work. Similarly, reviews of current practice by other authors refer to Boxall's original principles, and psychodynamic perspectives and attachment theory remain central (e.g. Bennethan, 1997; Cooper, 2001; Cooper, Arnold & Boyd, 2001; Iszatt & Wasilewska, 1997). In summary, the original principles of nurture groups appear to have been remarkably robust over time. However, this may have been because much of the recent work has been carried out by those committed to the approach and to Boxall's original ideas. It is less clear whether the whole range of current practice would adhere so closely to these original principles.

Nurture group practice

Despite the relatively large literature on nurture groups, it is difficult to gain a clear and concise picture of how nurture groups are run. Much of the recent work, e.g. Bennethan & Boxall (1997) and Boxall (2002), describes aspects of practice in considerable detail but does not provide an overall framework of key practice issues. Boxall's (1976) original leaflet is, however, quite useful in this respect, as its brevity leads to a concise description, as summarised below:

- The criterion for entry is that the child's inability to 'engage constructively in the day to day life of the class'.
- Run by teacher and a helper.
- Average of 12 children.
- Contact with the mainstream school.
- Domestic setting with work and play spaces.
- Unhurried approach.
- Close physical proximity and eye contact.
- Tasks broken down, choice limited at first.
- Positive behaviour recognised, disruptive is ignored as far as possible.
- Food is central and has symbolic value.
- Play is key.
- Structured, ordered day.
- Use of transitional objects.
- Adults model relationships
- Parental involvement is important
- The aim is to get the child back to the normal class – s/he must not feel or be perceived to be different to the other children

The groups described by more recent workers (e.g. Bishop & Swain, 2000; Colwell & O'Connor, 2003; Doyle, 2001; Iszatt & Wasilewska, 1997) seem to follow many of these original practices, although the actual descriptions of practice are often quite brief and few authors are explicit about the details of the underlying models they are drawing on. For example, Iszatt and Wasilewska (1997) describe the organisation of a typical nurture group but do not make it clear which model they are using, other than to say that it fitted with the 'classic' model of a nurture group.

The work of Cooper and his colleagues is, however, useful when considering nurture group practice. They review practice from the point of view of researchers who are

aiming to gain an overall picture of nurture group practice as part of a major research project. As part of the study, Cooper *et al.* (2001) looked at the key characteristics by which a nurture group could be defined:

- An agreed part of school/LEA integrated provision.
- Provides a setting where missed early learning experiences are provided.
- Children attend part time each day or for regular sessions, usually for 2 – 4 terms.
- Two adults model good relationships within a structured and predictable environment.
- Emphasis is on supporting positive social, emotional and cognitive development by responding to children in a developmentally appropriate way.
- The curriculum includes the National Curriculum.
- Emphasis on language development and intensive interaction.
- Social learning and play in the group situation are essential.
- Staff involve parents/carers as fully as possible.
- The aim is to return to full-time mainstream class.

A key characteristic of nurture groups that deserves further consideration is the focus on the group as part of the whole school. This appears to be a strong principle and, at its most fundamental level, is based on Boxall's (1976) original assertion that children in the nurture group were not 'a separate category of child' and that the approach is based on normal developmental practice. More recently, nurture groups have been viewed as part of a whole school approach and in integral part of the school (Bennathan, 1997). Doyle (2001) describes how nurture groups can help whole schools become more nurturing, inclusive establishments.

Variations on the nurture group model

Bennathan (1997) observes that, from their inception, there were variations of the nurture group model:

...even when the children could not be admitted to the group for reason of space, the class teacher could often achieve some success by using the nurture group approach
(Bennathan 1997, p.25).

In their recent national review, Cooper *et al.* (2001) also found that there were several variations on what they call 'classic Boxall nurture groups'. They describe current practice as falling to four main types:

- classic Boxall nurture groups;
- groups which differ in structure or organisational features but adhere to the core principles of the classic approach;
- groups which do not adhere to the core principles but which claim to be variations on the nurture group concept; and
- groups that are called nurture groups but 'contravene, undermine or distort the key defining principles of the classic nurture group'.

They do not mention any approaches that are not group based and there seems to be little mention of this form of variation the literature, with the concept of the group being extremely strong. Indeed, Boxall (2002) claims that it is essential that the children are in groups so that they respect the needs and views of others. One exception to this view is Lucas (1999) who describes an approach where the principles of nurture groups were applied flexibly to develop a 'whole school approach' in a school that did not have the need or commitment to set up an actual

group. She describes how this had a positive impact on both children and staff and led to the development of a 'nurturing school'.

Evaluations of nurture groups

Frederickson and Cline (2002) note the need for evaluations of interventions for children with Special Educational Needs in terms of the aims set and outcomes achieved. However, this does not always seem to happen in practice. Swinson *et al.* (2003) look specifically at educational interventions for children experiencing EBD and note that accounts tended to be discursive and not backed by evaluation evidence. Similarly, Cooper (2001) comments that although nurture groups have proved to be a popular intervention over time, there has been little systematic evaluation of their effectiveness.

Before moving on to consider the few evaluations of nurture groups that do exist, it may be helpful to gain an overview of the shortcomings of the current evaluation literature:

- Firstly, many of the evaluations have been carried out by those involved in developing the approach or by practitioners evaluating their own interventions (e.g. Doyle, 2000; Lyndon, 1992).
- Secondly, the evaluation information needs to be considered in light of the explicit agenda by several groups to promote the effectiveness of nurture groups (e.g. Nurture Group Network; AWCEBD).

- Thirdly, many of the evaluations are not rigorous and are often based on perceptions of change rather than direct measures linked to specified aims (e.g. Bishop & Swain, 2000).
- Finally, it should be remembered that positive outcomes from the groups do not provide confirmation that the underpinning theoretical frameworks e.g. attachment theory, are correct.

Turning to the research studies themselves, the field appears to be dominated by the three main studies outlined below:

1. *Iszaat & Wasilewska (1997)*: An evaluation of nurture groups in Enfield carried out by Educational Psychologists from that LEA. They drew on a range of information, e.g. follow-ups of children and control groups, Ofsted inspection reports.
2. *Bishop & Swain (2000)*: A university-based, detailed and qualitative evaluation of a nurture group. They looked at the perceptions of those involved and at the impact of the group on the wider school system.
3. *Cooper et al. (2001)*: This is the interim report from the Nurture Group Research Project – a two year national study of the outcomes of nurture groups, funded by the DfEE and the University of Leicester, in consultation with the Nurture Group Network and AWCEBD. The study involves 25 schools across 8 LEAs and uses matched control groups. A range of outcome measures were used, e.g. changes in children's skills and changes in perceptions, using a range of questionnaires and interview techniques.

The remaining research studies tend to be small, practitioner-led evaluations, and are generally much less rigorous. The following discussion will include the three main studies and the smaller scale research, as both have contributions to make to the overall picture on outcomes.

The outcomes of nurture groups

Overall, the evaluations of nurture groups tend to be very positive. From their inception, many benefits for children, staff and schools have been reported (Bennathan, 1997) and the picture continues to be very positive. The findings of the more recent research are summarised below in terms of key outcomes. It can be seen that, with the exception of the work by Bishop and Swain (2000), the outcomes reported are very positive.

<i>Changes in the children's skills:</i>	
Lyndon (1992)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● children made 'satisfactory' academic progress. ● BPVS and Goodenough scores increased.
Iszaat & Wasilewska (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● improvements in children's confidence and social skills.
Bishop & Swain (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● parents perceive changes in children's behaviour.
Cooper <i>et al.</i> (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● improvements in children's scores on checklists of social and emotional skills. ● teachers perceived children made academic progress. ● parents perceived children made academic progress and that their behaviour and feelings towards school had improved.
<i>Promotion of changes in self image:</i>	
Doyle (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● children show signs of building more positive self image.
Cooper <i>et al.</i> (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● pupils build a positive perception of themselves in the group in contrast to their negative perception of school.
Colwell & O'Connor (2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● nurture group teachers used more language that promoted self esteem than classroom teachers.
<i>Changes in parent liaison and views:</i>	
Lyndon (1992)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● parents valued the group as a 'shared experience' they could be part of.
Bennathan (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● parents welcomed placement in group. ● parents more willing to accept special placement later. ● staff perceive increases in parents valuing of their children.
Iszaat & Wasilewska (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● parents feel supported. ● partnership with parents fostered.
Bishop & Swain (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● parents perceive a reduced risk that their child will be excluded/ move to special provision. ● a 'transplant' model of home/school working was fostered.
<i>Promoting inclusion:</i>	
Bennathan (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 87% of pupils able to manage in mainstream after being in the nurture group compared to 55% in control group.
Iszaat & Wasilewska (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● For control group, 3 times as many needed a statutory assessment and 7 times as many needed special provision.
Bishop & Swain (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● respite for teachers was the main perceived aim, rather than inclusion – 'exclusion fostered under the flag of inclusion'.
<i>Changes in the whole school:</i>	
Bennathan (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● all staff helped to focus on what lies behind behaviour. ● teachers thinking and reporting was more structured.
Iszaat & Wasilewska (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● positive benefits to the school (do not give details).
Bishop & Swain (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● teachers perceive respite for themselves and other children in the class. ● nurture group staff felt it had enhanced their professional development. ● school managers felt group had benefits for the whole school. ● BUT holistic view of education in the group did not generalise to the whole school.
Cooper <i>et al.</i> (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 96% of teachers perceived a positive impact on whole school. ● development of nurturing approaches/ thinking across school. ● teachers more empowered to support children. ● school more able to cope with children with EBD. ● children not in the group are also helped to make progress.
Doyle (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● staff across school were more aware of the principles of nurturing. ● school was helped to become 'a more inclusive and nurturing environment'.
<i>Cost effectiveness:</i>	
Bennathan (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● cost of placement in group is less than that for a statutory assessment.
Iszaat & Wasilewska (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● groups are cost effective because they avoid the need for expensive alternative placements.

In conclusion, nurture groups represent one particular approach to supporting pupils with EBD, based on psychodynamic principles and, in particular, attachment theory. Much of the literature on nurture group practice centres on early work and the subsequent development of this work by a relatively small number of practitioners. Despite the limitations of the literature, there are indications that nurture groups remain popular and are perceived as having positive outcomes.

4. INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

4.1. Where did the nurturing programme fit within the framework of interventions for EBD?

The programme fitted within an educational conceptualisation of EBD (Jones, 2003; Smith & Cooper, 1993), as it was firmly based within a school and teaching context. In terms of Frederickson and Cline's (2002) model of interventions for Special Educational Needs, the programme could be described as a psychodynamic approach, in that the focus was on early experience and unconscious beliefs. However, it could also be viewed as having an emphasis on emotions, and therefore fits with perspectives that stress the importance of past and present emotions in behaviour (e.g. Bowers, 1996; Gray, 2002; Long & Fogell, 1999). With this emphasis on psychodynamic and emotional elements, the programme contrasts with the trends in EP practice found in the survey by Frederickson and Cline (2002), where behavioural approaches dominated the interventions recommended.

Looking specifically at attachment theory, which has been identified as a main underpinning of nurture groups (Colwell & O'Connor, 2003), this was definitely an example of attachment theory being used in an educational context, rather than its predominant use by medical personal (e.g. Ziegenhain, 2004). This fits with the thinking of Williams *et al.* (1995) who promote the use of attachment theory to inform educational interventions. However, their model focuses on 'counselling' rather than the more normal, everyday experiences offered by this nurturing programme.

A criticism of underpinnings of the programme could be that it promoted a deviance model of EBD (Bate & Moss, 1997), i.e. there was something 'wrong' with the pupil that needed something special to 'fix' it. However, the model was clearly based on the notion that normal experiences are needed to support the development of behavioural skills (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000; Boxall, 2002) and in this way the programme challenged the notion that something 'special' was needed for this pupil in terms of segregated special educational provision. This view had been particularly prevalent amongst staff and parents immediately before the programme began.

Unlike some approaches to interventions for EBD and the 'classic' nurture group approach, this was an individualised programme. This marks a key contrast with some popular approaches for EBD, which group children with difficulties together. The individual nature of the programme avoided some of the problems with group approaches as outlined by Lines (2003).

4.2. How did the programme fit with the key principles and practice of a nurture group?

The programme fitted with the original principles outlined by Boxall (1976) and her later developments of these (Boxall, 2002). For example, it involved a child who had experienced unsettled early life situations, who lacked the emotional skills needed to cope in whole-class situations and who was finding it difficult to form secure attachments with others. This link with the nurture group principles was achieved through close reference to the literature at the planning stage. The programme was also explicitly forward looking and concerned with growth and change, as described by Boxall (1976).

The programme also fitted with approaches that stress the psychodynamic aspects of nurture groups and the focus on early attachments (e.g. Bennathan, 1997; Cooper, 2001; Cooper *et al.*, 2001; Iszatt & Wasilewska, 1997). Indeed, before the programme began, considerable time was taken to understand and explore the child's possible underlying emotions linked to attachment.

Turning to the actual practice of nurture groups, the programme showed many similarities to the 'classic' model outlined by Boxall (1976, 2002), including

- contact with the mainstream class;
- a structured day, with tasks broken down;
- an emphasis on physical proximity and building relationships;
- an unhurried approach;
- an emphasis on domestic, everyday situations; and
- working towards re-inclusion into the mainstream class.

The group also fits with many of features of practice found in the survey of current nurture group practice by Cooper *et al.* (2001):

- it was an integrated provision;
- sessions were part time/regular;
- early learning experiences were provided;
- intensive interaction was a feature; and
- practice was grounded in an understanding of developmental needs.

More generally, the programme fitted with the idea of a nurture group as part of a whole school approach, rather than a provision for a 'special' category of child. This fits with assertion that groups should be part of whole school practice and that this can lead to more nurturing practice across the school (Bennathan, 1997; Doyle, 2001). In retrospect, the programme was very much an extension of normal classroom practice, despite the fact that initially most of the time was spent outside of the classroom. This was helped by the fact that the classteacher was central in devising the programme and it was very clear that the pupil was part of her class and that she was his teacher. This was a real strength of the programme.

Despite these similarities, the programme did differ from the nurture group approach in several key aspects. Firstly, and most obviously, because it was an individual programme rather than a group approach. The 'classic' nurture group approach is clearly group-based and the review of current practice by Cooper *et al.* (2001) outlines only group based approaches. Several authors (e.g. Boxall, 2002; Cooper *et al.*, 2001) stress the essential role of learning in a group situation. As the programme developed, it did include some group situations but these were everyday learning situations rather than nurture group settings.

The second key difference is that the programme was implemented by a Teaching Assistant, rather than the 'classic' model of a teacher and a TA. Clearly this difference is linked in part to the individual nature of the programme and it would not have been as appropriate to involve two adults. However, it is true to say that the delivery of the programme was very much in the hands of the TA, and this is a significant difference.

The third key difference is also linked to the role of adults. The classteacher rather than a nurture group teacher was the key adult in devising the programme and reviewing progress. As mentioned previously, this helped the programme to be part of inclusive practice and normal school procedures. However, it also represents a significant departure from the classic nurture group model, where the child becomes part of another class for at least part of the day. In the individualised programme, regular meetings between parents, classteacher and the TA meant that although the classteacher was not working directly with the child, she was a vital part of the programme. This, combined with the child's time in the normal classroom situation each day, meant that the classteacher was the key adult in the programme.

4.3. How did the outcomes compare with those of nurture groups?

The intervention did include an evaluation process. Frederickson and Cline (2002) say there should be careful evaluation of the outcomes in terms of the aims set, and this was the case. There was clarity about the objectives and school staff collected data over a relatively long period of time.

In contrast to the three main evaluation studies (Bishop & Swain, 2000; Cooper *et al.*, 200; Iszaat & Wasilewska, 1997) the evaluation of the programme was very informal. The evaluation used only two measures – sessions in school and sessions without any serious behaviour incidents. Other outcomes were established from the informal observations of key adults involved in the programme, rather than being collected in any systematic way. In the three main studies and in the wider literature, the focus is on indirect measures of progress and on perceptions of change. Therefore, the focus on direct measures in this evaluation can be viewed as one of its strengths. However, an improvement would be to also collect information on the indirect measures in a more systematic way.

The positive outcomes obtained from the evaluation were very much in line with those obtained in the evaluations of nurture groups. The outcomes identified in the study can be compared with those in the literature in terms of the key areas of change reported in the literature:

Changes in children's skills: (Bishop & Swain, 2000; Cooper *et al.*, 2001; Iszaat & Wasilewska, 1997; Lyndon, 1992). The evaluation collected quantitative and qualitative evidence of improvements in the pupil's behaviour skills. This is in agreement with the positive changes reported in the literature.

Promotion of changes in self image: (Colwell & O'Connor, 2003; Cooper *et al.*, 2001; Doyle, 2001). The evaluation did not specifically address this area but there was evidence that key adults perceived changes that may relate to improvements in

self image, e.g. reports that the child was more able to tackle challenging tasks and that he was more able to cope with his work being displayed on the wall.

Changes in parent liaison and views: (Bishop & Swain, 2000; Bennathan, 1997; Iszaat & Wasilewska, 1997; Lyndon, 1992). This area was not addressed in the evaluation, so it is not possible to make comparisons with the positive changes reported in the literature. However, from the author's perspective, the previous very positive working relationship between parents and school continued during the duration of the programme.

Promoting inclusion: (Bishop & Swain, 2000; Bennathan, 1997; Iszaat & Wasilewska, 1997). The evaluation indicated significant improvements in the child's inclusion in school and in class. The concerns raised by Bishop and Swain (2000) about nurture groups fostering exclusion did not seem apparent, and this may have been due to the individualised nature of the programme and continued involvement and ownership by the classteacher.

Changes in the whole school: (Bishop & Swain, 2000; Bennathan, 1997; Cooper *et al.*, 2001; Doyle, 2001; Iszaat & Wasilewska, 1997). This area was not addressed through the evaluation, and this was a key omission. It would have been very interesting to see how the programme had impacted on thinking in the wider school – and to see whether the positive changes noted in the literature (Cooper *et al.*, 2001; Doyle, 2001) were observed or whether, as Bishop and Swain (2000) noted, the nurture view of education did not generalise to the rest of the school.

Cost effectiveness: (Bennathan, 1997; Iszaat & Wasilewska, 1997). It is difficult to compare the programme with the claims in the literature that the approach is more cost effective than alternatives. However, as it used existing resources (TA time, classteacher time) it could be argued that it was a cost effective use of the current level of resources allocated to the pupil.

Overall, the evaluation outcomes for the programme link quite closely with those in the literature, although not all the possible evaluation areas were covered. Given that impact on the whole school is an area of some controversy in the literature, it would have been beneficial to have included this in the evaluation programme in order to ensure that no negative outcomes occurred across the wider school system.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This assignment has reviewed an adaptation of the nurture group model for supporting children with EBD. It has looked at how an individualised nurturing programme compares with previous and existing practice in relation to nurture groups. This allows conclusions to be drawn about the adaptability of the nurture group model and indicates that the approach can be adapted without altering its fundamental characteristics or the emphasis on psychodynamic principles and attachment. The programme adhered to the key practices of nurture groups, although there were differences in three main respects:

- it was an individual rather than a group programme;
- the Teaching Assistant implemented the programme; and
- the Classteacher maintained the lead responsibility.

These differences may mean that some of the disadvantages of a group-based intervention were avoided and the child's inclusion in the class may well have been fostered as a result.

Despite the fact that an evaluation was carried out and positive outcomes identified, there is a need for fuller evaluations of any future programmes. These will need to address the impact of the programme on a wider range of outcomes, including on the school as a whole. However, the overall success of this programme does indicate that the nurture group model has the potential to inform more diverse intervention approaches.

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APPENDIX 1

SETTING UP THE PROGRAMME

Taking the decision to try something different

The 'decision to try something different' was taken in discussions between the EP and Headteacher/ SENCO. The EP introduced the principles of a nurturing programme and through joint discussions and exploration of the problems, it was agreed that a nurturing programme might be appropriate. It is important to appreciate that at this stage we were not discussing a programme as such, more the set of principles and approaches that we would be using.

Planning the programme

The next steps in implementation took place over the next two weeks and involved the following elements: School lead the process, in consultation with the EP.

- Gaining consent of all concerned – the principles of informed consent were followed. Consent from the TA and parents was key. Also, the Psychiatric Social Worker had become involved and she had a role in discussing the programme with parents.
- Setting the aims for the programme – These were jointly set by all concerned. The aims were to increase time in school and to have positive experiences in school.
- Defining roles – Time was taken to clarify the roles the key adults would take, eg TA, classteacher, EP, Headteacher.
- Conducting a 'nurture audit' – An audit of was carried out of potential activities, resources, spaces and creative ways of using the range of experiences in the school. Opportunities for inclusion in whole class activities were also considered, so that they could be planned into the programme.
- Planning the programme and the graduated approach – deciding on times in school, which would be gradually built up over the weeks. A timetable of activities for the sessions the pupil would attend was agreed. It was agreed that the initial focus would be on short times in school that were positive for both the pupil and staff.
- Establishing a baseline – The existing school records of the pupil's behaviour were used to establish a baseline of weekly time in school and successful sessions (the school had already set up a session by session recording system).

APPENDIX 2

THE NURTURING PROGRAMME

The nurturing programme contained several key elements:

- **The nurturing activities** – These were based around topics. They were activity based and enjoyable and non-threatening to the pupil. National curriculum-based learning objectives were used, and more literacy and numeracy based objectives were ‘threaded in’. The classteacher took lead on planning the National Curriculum elements, and the TA on the activities. The general principle was to blur the boundary between formal and informal learning experiences.
- **The weekly timetable** – This detailed the sessions to be spent in school and the activities with the class and with the TA. Over time, small group activities were also included. The detail of each timetable reflected the child’s progress over the previous week and the ongoing work in class and with the TA
- **Space** - Much of the 1:1nurture time was delivered in part of a shared area just outside the (open plan) classroom. The allocated area was relatively small and furnished with a table, chairs and a beanbag. It was bound by two walls on one side and low cupboards on the others and therefore offered a defined space but was not cut off from the rest of the shared area. On two walls of the quiet area there were large display boards and these were used to display the pupil’s work. Other areas of the school were also used for nurturing activities eg the nursery for choosing time and a cookery area.
- **Key adults** - The TA was the key adult for the child in school. Her accepting, non-confrontational, reassuring and positive approach formed the basis of a secure attachment within the school environment. She also provided a clear behaviour management programme. The classteacher and Headteacher were also key adults in school and also nurtured positive relationships with the pupil. The Headteacher had a key role in the behaviour management programme.
- **Praise and Rewards** - There was a strong emphasis on praise and the celebration of success. Very frequent rewards were given in the form of a stamp chart and stickers that were taken home each day. Items made in the activities were photographed, shared and celebrated. Many were also taken home, thus fostering attachments at home and the link between home and school.
- **Hellos and goodbyes** – these were particularly important, as the pupil was not in school all day. Care was taken to ensure positive and managed transitions between home and school. Transitional objects in the form of toys from home were used to offer reassurance in school.

- Small group activities – as time went on, it was possible to introduce small group activities. These were carefully planned to ensure they were enjoyable and non-threatening and built positive relationships with peers . As a general principle, we discovered that the pupil needed to feel very secure with any particular skill before he could cope with carrying it out in a group setting.
- Whole-class activities - Care was taken to plan inclusion into the whole class setting for activities where the pupil could experience enjoyment and success. Registration, assembly, handwriting and playtimes were all sessions where the pupil could join the class on a daily basis. He was also included in whole-school and special events. Strategies were devised for support in the classroom eg adult support, placemat and carpet tile to define spaces, toy sitting on a shelf on its own carpet tile.
- Behaviour management programme – This provided clear and consistent boundaries. The focus was on physical aggression, with removal to a quiet area for acts of physical aggression towards others. There was a conscious balance between control and reassurance in dealing with these behaviours. Non-aggressive responses to frustration were seen as more desirable and dealt with in a low-key way. Praise and preventative measures were also important.
- The graduated programme – the programme changed and developed in response to the pupil's progress. Although the overall aim was to increase time in school and with the class, the level of inclusion was slightly modified depending how settled the pupil was. It became clear that being in the whole class situation could sometimes be stressful for the pupil. However, at all times there were some positive whole-class activities each day.

APPENDIX 3

MONITORING PROGRESS

- Weekly meetings were held between parents and school staff to review progress and plan the next week. The weekly behaviour records were key in this process.
- Adjusting the programme: It became clear that it was important to progress at the pupil's pace. Initial targets for increased attendance and whole-class activities were maintained but timescales were modified on a weekly basis. Over time, and as a result of the clear recording system, it became clear that there were patterns to the pupil's behaviour difficulties and that at certain times he needed a high level of secure, nurturing activities
- More formal review meetings were held half-termly - involving all concerned: school, parents, EP, psychiatric social worker, BST. These were an opportunity to joint problem solve and to recognise and celebrate the successes made over a longer period of time.

ASSIGNMENT 4

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERPERSONAL MANAGEMENT SKILLS WITHIN THE ROLE OF SENIOR EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST.

ABSTRACT

This assignment is based on the author's experience of a Senior EP role and the CPD activities undertaken to develop the interpersonal management skills necessary for that role. The literature on the development of interpersonal management skills and CPD is considered, with particular reference to the small literature relating directly to educational psychologists. This is then used to inform the author's future professional development in terms of refocusing CPD activities on the 'people' aspects of management, using semi-formal and workplace-based activities and developing a longer-term professional development plan. The need for educational psychology to refocus attention on the interpersonal aspects of management and on opportunities for workplace learning is discussed.

AIMS AND SCOPE OF THIS ASSIGNMENT

This assignment reviews the development of interpersonal management skills through the experiences of the author over the past four years. It focuses on a move from one Senior Educational Psychologist (Senior EP) role to another in a new service and looks at how Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities helped the author to develop the interpersonal skills necessary for this new role. The new Senior EP role is considered within the context of the literature on management, and particularly the interpersonal aspects of management skills and management within EP services. The literature on CPD is also reviewed, with particular attention to EP perspectives on informal learning in the workplace and on the development of management skills. Finally, the assignment considers the experiences of the author in the light of the literature and this information is used to provide guidance regarding activities to promote the development of interpersonal management skills for the author in the future.

The key aims of the assignment are outlined below:

1. To review the context and practice in relation to the development of interpersonal management skills in a particular Senior EP role:

- to reflect on the author's personal context in terms of changing job roles over the past four years;
- to review the activities used to develop interpersonal management skills over this time; and
- to consider the professional context in relation to the development of management skills for EPs.

2. To consider the literature on the interpersonal aspects of management skills, with particular reference to

- the study of management skills;
- management within educational psychology services;
- CPD and interpersonal management skills; and
- certain CPD activities.

3. To consider the author's personal experience in light of the literature and in relation to

- the new Senior EP role;
- the particular CPD activities used to develop interpersonal management skills;
- implications for the author's future development; and
- the wider professional implications.

Potential benefits of this assignment

It is hoped that by considering the CPD experiences undertaken in the new Senior EP role and linking these to the literature, ways of developing the author's CPD in the future will be identified. It is also intended that wider implications for the author's service can be identified in terms of developing CPD more generally. Finally,

although this assignment will focus on one particular ‘case study’ of CPD experiences, the generalisability of this personal experience will be discussed and the wider implications for the profession of educational psychology will be considered.

1. CONTEXT AND PRACTICE

1.1. The personal context

The context for this assignment is based on the author’s experience of two very different Senior EP roles. These roles are outlined below:

Senior EP role 1 (prior to November 2001)

This role was within a county service of approximately 30 EPs. The service had 5 Senior EPs, each with specific areas of functional responsibility. EPs therefore related to a number of Senior EPs, depending on the particular issue, and there were no area teams in terms of the organisational structure of the service. The Senior post was divided between 0.8 functional management responsibilities (e.g. service delivery to mainstream schools, project management, the Assistant EP programme) and 0.2 service delivery to a group of schools. There were no line management responsibilities, except in relation to four Assistant EPs. However, support and supervision was given to EPs across the service in relation to the specific functional areas. The Principal EP was very involved in the work of the Senior EPs and held regular supervision meetings to monitor their work in key areas. Peer supervision and support meetings for the Senior EPs took place on a regular basis.

Senior EP role 2 (November 2001 to the present time)

This post was also in a large county, and within a service of approximately the same size. However, the structure of this service was very different in that it was organised into 3 area teams, each with an office base and a Senior EP who had responsibility for management of the team. Much of the day-to-day management and development of EPs' work took place at a team level and there was a considerable degree of freedom and independence for the teams. The resulting Senior EP role required many new skills and responsibilities, including

- line management of 10 EPs and 3 secretaries;
- overall responsibility for managing the area office, including administration procedures, building maintenance, etc.;
- management responsibility for all aspects of EP work within the team;
- team development and CPD plans and activities;
- representation of the team and service on all area-based developments, e.g. liaison with local services and liaison with local SEN officers;
- responsibility for team meetings, appraisals, and supervision;
- management of the team budget

There were also cross-service functional responsibilities (e.g. Early Years and CPD) but these had a lower profile than in the previous service. In addition, this post had a larger proportion of 'regular' EP work with a group of schools (0.5 time allocation). Regular (three weekly) management meetings were held between the Principal EP and the Area Seniors but there was no other formalised system of supervision or support.

The breadth and diversity of this new role was outlined in a development activity undertaken by the three Area Senior EPs in the summer 2003. The aim was to gain a full picture of the tasks and responsibilities of the role. Four key levels of the role were identified:

- team operational management;
- service functions;
- children's Services functions; and
- LEA functions.

Appendix 1 shows the results of this development activity, with details of the tasks and activities at each level.

The new role necessitated the development of new skills, particularly as a result of the greater emphasis on team management. There was also much more freedom, trust and devolved responsibility and, although supervision was available from the Principal EP if needed, this happened infrequently. There was no induction to the service or to the new role and a different set of management and interpersonal skills therefore needed to be acquired very quickly.

1.2. CPD activities undertaken to develop interpersonal management skills

Activities to develop management skills were undertaken on a fairly ad hoc basis and were fitted within the demands of the day-to-day management of the team and school visits. A number of management development activities focusing on interpersonal skills were carried out following the move of service, and these are outlined below.

Appraisal and 360° feedback

Appraisal was a key element of the CPD process in two ways – it was the main way in which feedback was given and it was the process through which CPD was planned. Appraisal meetings took place on an annual basis and were conducted in a fairly relaxed and informal way. They contained a 360° feedback process that used a questionnaire developed by the Principal EP. This was circulated to 2 EPs in the team, 1 secretary and 2 headteachers (all randomly chosen). The questionnaire covered areas such as clarity of role, planning, empathy, relationships, reliability, and flexibility – with each being rated on a 7 point (see Appendix 2 for the full questionnaire). The completed forms were shared at the appraisal meeting and were briefly discussed. Generally, the findings were very positive and were not particularly helpful in informing future development. The appraisal meeting was also used to formulate the CPD plan for the coming year. Relatively little attention was given to this plan and it was very much under control of the Principal EP. The plans tended to focus on specific activities (e.g. courses and tasks) and there was little emphasis on the interpersonal aspects of management.

Conference attendance

The author attended the National Association of Principal EPs annual conference in 2003. This conference focused on leadership specifically from the point of view of EPs. The main part of the day was taken up by a presentation of research carried out by Beverley Alimo-Metcalf, a psychologist with Leadership Research and Development Ltd who had carried out a major research project on leadership in the UK public sector. The research stressed the importance of the interpersonal, transformational aspects of management and the importance of gaining feedback

from those who are managed. This conference was a useful reminder of the importance of interpersonal skills in management.

Management programme for Senior EPs

This course consisted of four sessions at the University of East London. The sessions covered a range of areas including financial issues and LEA contexts but also addressed some of the interpersonal aspects of management. For example, there were sessions on motivating and supporting teams, and on dealing with interpersonal difficulties. However, perhaps the most useful parts of the course were the small group coaching sessions and informal discussions with other participants, as it was through these that day-to-day experiences could be explored.

The County Council's management development programme

This programme was available to all managers in the County Council and offered a range of seminars, development days and longer courses. As part of the programme, a day was spent shadowing a senior LEA manager and discussing aspects of management with him. The main focus of the day was on coping with the conflicting tasks within the management role and prioritising time, but it was also a chance to observe management within a more 'relaxed' context than the EP Service.

Informal learning in the workplace

On taking on the new Senior role, there were many learning opportunities that arose as part of everyday work. Indeed, each new responsibility presented a range of new situations that needed to be handled. Much of this learning involved learning to supervise and support individuals within the team and to build, manage and lead the

team as a whole. This informal learning was not planned and there was little chance to reflect on it with anyone else.

1.3. The professional context: management skills within educational psychology

Management and leadership in educational psychology services were not considered until the 1970s, and since that time EPs have paid only 'intermittent attention' to management issues (Rowland, 2001). The first management course for Senior EPs was held in 1974, but since this time the context of management in services has changed considerably (Stratford, 1995). A landmark event for raising the profile of management within the profession was the publication of a special issue of *Educational Psychology in Practice*. This contained a collection of articles that examined management in terms of the changes that were happening at that time - such as functional management replacing line management (e.g. Stratford, 1995; Wright, Cameron, Gallagher & Faulkner, 1995), 'value for money' (e.g. Wright *et al.*, 1995) and delegation of services to schools (e.g. Kerfoot, 1995; Watmough & Thompson, 1995). More recently, the Department for Education and Employment working party report on educational psychology services (DfEE, 2000) paid relatively little attention to management, with the focus on policy and procedures with relatively little emphasis on interpersonal skills.

CPD appears to be more established within the profession. The working party report (DfEE, 2000) pays little attention to CPD but the subsequent consultation paper prepared by its training subgroup (December 2000) does look at this area in detail.

The overall view is that CPD should be an integral part of practice, but should not be restricted to a single format or route. The importance of CPD is clearly stressed.

2. THE LITERATURE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERPERSONAL MANAGEMENT SKILLS

2.1. The study of management skills

There is a large literature on management across disciplines such as economics, management studies and sociology, and it is a topic that has stimulated much debate (Flynn, 1999). Lawton and Rose (1994) conclude that there has been much theorising about management but little empirical evidence or agreement on what managers actually do. They stress that management is a holistic, flexible and variable set of behaviours rather than the specific set of skills that some of the literature suggests.

Management and professionals

Within the field of management there is considerable debate about the contrasts between management in the private and public sectors (Lawton & Rose, 1994) and, in particular, in relation to the issues of managing professionals. Maister (1993) describes how, in his view, managers in the private sector can add value to the work of professional groups by motivating professionals and building teams. However, several other authors have commented on the challenges that managing professionals can present. Flynn (1999) considers management in the public sector from a

sociological point of view and suggests that there are fundamental contradictions in the labels 'professionalism' and 'manager' in terms of areas such as objectives, reference groups and clients. He suggests that this can lead to tensions between the two roles, even when professionals themselves are acting as managers. In contrast, Causer and Exworthy (1999) challenge the idea of a simple dichotomy between professionals and managers in the public sector. They describe the development of 'hybrid' management roles for nurses, social workers and teachers and claim that the boundaries between managerialism and professionalism are becoming increasingly blurred, with more roles including both professional practice and management elements. McKenna and Maister (2002) also suggest that for professionals, the relationship between a manager and those managed is less distinct and can be best described in terms of peers and colleagues.

Interpersonal skills and management

Interpersonal relationships play a key part in the world of work, both as a source of potential support and stress (Arnold, Robertson & Cooper, 1991). Wylie and Grothe (1993), from their perspectives as psychologists, claim that a certain amount of 'struggle' is inevitable when people are working towards a common goal and stress the importance of interpersonal skills at work. Considerable attention has also been given to the interpersonal aspects of management, particularly in the private sector. For example, McKenna and Maister (2002) suggest:

Your technical competence and knowledge will determine a small proportion of your effectiveness as a group leader. The overwhelming determinant of whether or not you will be effective has to do with your people skills –interpersonal, social and emotional (p.27).

From their experience as management consultants they recommend that managers deal with colleagues with the same 'delicacy and forethought' as they would do when dealing with their 'most powerful clients'. Bennis (1999), one of the leading figures in management and leadership in the US, also places considerable emphasis on interpersonal skills including building 'authentic human relationships' and a sense of empowerment and involvement. He emphasises the need for empathy, listening and openness in relationships with others – and notes that many corporate leaders lack these skills.

Despite this strong emphasis, there seems to be little evidence for the importance of interpersonal skills. Both of the examples outlined above contain no evidence to substantiate their claims. One exception, however, is the work by Kouzes and Posner (1995) who, as management consultants, reviewed 2,500 examples of 'best' leadership and concluded that good leaders give power away to their teams and build caring relationships with them. They do not describe how exactly they reached these conclusions but they do use some form of evidence base. Another major shortcoming of the literature is that some of the work by management consultants uses rather simplistic notions of interpersonal interaction. One such example is Jay (2003) who stresses the importance of 'people skills' for managers but uses some rather crude conceptualisations of these skills, e.g. identifying categories of 'difficult people' and using 'counselling' at work.

Management and educational psychology

Management and leadership are important aspects of educational psychology (Rowland, 2001; Webster & Hoyle, 2000) but the literature on management for EPs

is very small. Webster and Hoyle (2000) look at some of the issues related to management within educational psychology and their comments reflect many of the points already discussed in the section on professionals and management. They suggest that 'managerialism' principles (the assumptions that most activities need to be managed) may not have relevance in public sector settings and that the task of management in EP services is to provide 'space' for EPs to work with a degree of autonomy. Fox (1992) looks specifically at the management role of the Senior EP and discusses the lack of role clarity and the range of forms this role can take. He also notes that in many large counties, the management role of the Senior EP can be extensive, especially if services are organised into hierarchical structures.

Interpersonal management skills in educational psychology

In contrast with the focus on interpersonal skills in the general management literature, most of the literature on management in educational psychology services focuses on the organisational and task aspects of management (e.g. Bartram & Wolfendale, 1999; Kerfoot, 1995; Watmough & Thompson, 1995). Hedderly (1997) notes the lack of new, thought-provoking models of EP management and Rowland (2002) argues that leadership in psychology services has been neglected as a subject of study. A few papers do mention interpersonal skills but only briefly. For example, Watmough and Thompson (1995) talk about the importance of EPs applying psychology in personal and organisational relationships but then focus only on financial and operational management. Similarly, Wright *et al.* (1995) discuss psychological management skills such as consultation, creating positive change, and empowerment, but focus more on the management structures of services.

One important exception to this lack of emphasis on interpersonal skills is a paper by Cameron (1995), which appeared as part of the special management edition of *Educational Psychology in Practice*. Cameron argues that if performance management is to be successful it cannot ignore what he calls the 'people factor' and the body of evidence from psychological research. He warns that an over-focus on performance may lead to an under-focus on people and outlines approaches drawn from psychology to enhance the 'people' aspects of management. These include:

- *Empowerment* – encouraging staff to be proactive, work together, develop their skills, and help and support each other.
- *Homology* – handling internal relationships with the same sensitivity and understanding as when EPs deliver services to 'clients'.
- *Cultural synergy* – having a shared vision and objectives, clear roles and a high level of trust so that people feel their contributions are valued.
- *Intrinsic motivation* – maximising choice, minimising stress, and acknowledging negative feelings in order to promote EPs' feelings of competence and self-determination.

Cameron outlines a list of manager behaviours that focus on people management.

These are described in terms of personal qualities (e.g. approachable and understanding, empathetic and warm), beliefs (e.g. that management is about empowerment, that everyone can change) and professional qualities (e.g. adhering to high standards of behaviour, promoting the welfare of staff).

Interpersonal management skills: summary

Much has been written about the importance of interpersonal skills in the general management literature and these skills are seen as a key element of performance in the private sector. In contrast, management has been given relatively little attention

within educational psychology and the literature that does exist focuses almost exclusively on organisational and task management. The assignment will now consider CPD and, in particular, CPD activities that may be used to develop management skills.

2.2. Continuing Professional Development

A useful starting point for this discussion about CPD is the survey of UK professionals carried out by Friedman, Davis and Phillips (2001). They conclude that CPD is 'an expansive and inclusive concept' and that its purpose and value are contentious in the view of professionals. The survey focused on formal learning activities but Bee and Bee (2003) stress that there is a continuum of CPD activities, ranging from formal (e.g. courses) to semi-formal (coaching, secondment) and informal (discussions with colleagues, learning from everyday experience). Garrick (1998) notes that organisations tend to promote the type of knowledge that leads to efficiency, profit, and organisational prestige and that this leads to a valuing of CPD that is performance based rather than more reflective and internalised. Friedman *et al.* (2001) looked at perceptions of barriers to CPD in their survey. Employers and employees identified the following barriers (although it should be remembered that they were only considering formal learning activities):

- lack of time;
- lack of money;
- lack of access to relevant activities;
- workplace culture that is hostile/indifferent to CPD;
- lack of incentives for undertaking CPD;
- an overly constraining CPD scheme;
- lack of professional association support.

CPD and educational psychology

Despite the existence of the professional guidelines for CPD outlined in Section 1, little attention has been paid to the nature and role of CPD within educational psychology services (Frederickson, 1988). McCarthy (1992) also observes that, despite the fact that learning is a central part of psychological knowledge, there are few examples of this knowledge being applied within the field of educational psychology (she cites Frederickson's paper as an exception). She goes on to develop some of these psychological perspectives and notes that many factors will impact on the development of individuals, including the type of institution, style of leadership, the environment, and individual aspirations, roles and characteristics. A small literature does exist on the link between individual and organisational development in EP services. For example, Sharp, Frederickson and Laws (2000) describe a performance review process where individual CPD is very much seen within the context of service priority areas and Bracher (2001) notes that reflective practitioners are a key element of EP services that are 'learning organisations'. He also stresses the importance of problem solving approaches, trial and error learning, risk-taking and the tolerance of individual variation and beliefs in such services.

CPD and interpersonal management skills

Wylie and Grothe (1993) comment that most managers have become managers for reasons other than their ability to manage people and have never received management training. In contrast, Lawton and Rose (1994) report on the growing interest in management development and look at some of the approaches used for management development, drawing on research from various sources. They list areas such as career planning, appraisal, self-managed learning, networking,

coaching, mentoring, shadowing and ‘buddy schemes’. Other authors have focused on the importance of feedback on performance for managers (e.g. Maister, 1993) and the role of workplace-based learning experiences in developing management skills (e.g. Beckett, 1999).

Very little has been written about the development of management skills for EPs and many Principal EPs are not trained managers, although they may use applications of psychological knowledge to run services (Hedderly, 1997). The only area that has received any real attention in the literature is the use feedback to inform the development of management skills. For example, Cameron (1995) briefly describes a feedback questionnaire for the interpersonal skills of EP managers but does not describe in detail how this is used to develop skills. Sharp *et al.* (2000) describe a feedback questionnaire for Senior and Principal EPs that focuses on several management skills, including ‘empathetic leadership’, ‘team management’ and ‘communication style’. However, as this is not the focus of their paper, it is not described in detail.

Specific CPD activities to develop management skills

The literature on certain CPD activities relevant to this particular discussion will now be reviewed.

a. Appraisal and feedback:

Appraisal is a fairly recent development within educational psychology. Swinson (1989) looks at one of the first attempts to introduce an appraisal system and concludes that an alternative model based on regular individual meetings with a

supervisor could be more effective. In considering appraisal for EPs, McCarthy (1992) concludes that:

...the whole area of appraisal is emotive and open to much debate. There appears to be no single, generally accepted use of the term, but there are a variety of approaches and definitions of the concept (p.91).

Despite these initial reservations, appraisal now seems to have become an established part of most services (e.g. Imich, Marshall & Wright, 1992; Twisleton, 1992). In a survey of services by Webster (2001) it was found that 79% had an appraisal system and that several used a 360° feedback system as part of the process. There were 'a small number' of services where members of the management team received feedback from those they managed.

Very little has been written about what constitutes effective appraisal for EPs. One exception is McCarthy (1992) who refers to the features of effective appraisal systems. These features include the need for trust, the importance of feedback, appraisee involvement/autonomy, and a shared understanding of the process. There is also a small but useful literature on the use of feedback in EPs' appraisals.

Feedback is important in professional development because it allows us to see aspects of ourselves that others are aware of but that may not be known to ourselves (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Sharp *et al.* (2000) describe in some detail a 360° feedback model used in the performance reviews of EPs, outlining a model that is firmly grounded in psychology and organisational development and which they adapted specifically for an EP service. The process of developing and evaluating this tool appears to have been lengthy and carefully considered. In their model, the

collective opinions of a number of people (usually peers, managers, people line managed and key clients/stakeholders) are averaged and then compared with the individual's own perceptions. Sharp and colleagues provide a particularly useful guide to some of the elements of 360° feedback for EPs:

- It should involve a process of support to interpret feedback and set goals.
- It should be driven by research rather than management wishes - managers may not want anonymised feedback but research shows that named feedback can lack validity.
- It should utilise a representative sample of raters selected on the basis of objective criteria.
- It should be remembered that raters' evaluations may not be right or consistent.
- A minimum of four respondents is needed.
- Questionnaires should be carefully designed and informed by the relevant literature otherwise they may be counterproductive.

b. Informal learning activities:

Workplace-based learning is an increasingly popular concept (Bould & Solomon, 2001) and this has led to a growth in the literature in this area in the last few years (Garrick, 1998). It is based on the premise that everyday situations provide rich sources of information and that it is through these activities that individuals learn (Billett, 1999). The literature in this area is diverse and there is no overarching framework of learning in the workplace (Garrick, 1999). One of the key developments in this field was the book by Marsick and Watkins (1990), who outlined the features of workplace learning from their perspectives as Human Resources professionals. In their view, it is not highly structured, places control with

the learner and it is not classroom based. They cite a wide range of psychological and educational theories to underpin their comments but give little evidence beyond case examples to support any of their claims. They also call for renewed attention on workplace learning in CPD programmes and outline the necessary conditions for this form of learning (collaborative learning with others, a learning community in the workplace, motivation, a range of workplace activities, and time to reflect on situations). Similarly, Billett (1999) stresses the importance of workplace learning and suggests a 'workplace curriculum' that would include:

- identification of flexible pathways of learning experiences that learners need to access as they move towards expertise;
- access to the products of workplace activities – to help workers understand the basis on which their performance is being judged;
- direct guidance from more expert others – to model and coach workplace activity and to monitor progress; and
- day-to-day experience and contact in the workplace.

Billett stresses the importance of guidance from another person in ensuring the development of 'robust' and transferable workplace knowledge, but notes that this type of guidance and support is not always easy to achieve in real situations. Garrick (1999) also notes the importance of mentors, supervisors and coaches in workplace learning and these activities are discussed in the next section.

c. Supervision and coaching:

Hawkins and Shohert (2000) suggest that supervision is an important part of professional development in the helping professions. They note that it can have several functions (managerial, supportive and educative), but that it is important for

developing the skills and knowledge of the supervisee. Nolan (1999) surveyed 58 EP services and found that 33% of EPs received supervision but that it was less common for Senior EPs. Nolan focuses on the support and managerial functions of supervision but others (e.g. Pomerantz, 1993) see supervision for EPs as a key part aspect of professional learning. Supervision is generally viewed positively within educational psychology but there are some cautions. For example, Leyden and Kuk (1993) note that supervision for EPs that takes place in a climate of mistrust can be counterproductive.

Coaching focuses on the educational aspects of supervision and is an activity that has particular prominence for professionals in the private sector (Maister, 1993). It is difficult to obtain precise descriptions of coaching but Bee and Bee (2003) provide a useful overview of coaching for UK professionals. They claim that it has become perhaps the most common form of semi-formal learning activity but stress the need for some form of structure and formality to the coaching relationship in terms of planned learning objectives, monitoring of progress and evaluation of outcomes. They claim that coaching is particularly appropriate for the on-going development of skills and for skills that need to be tailored to specific work situations. Harri-Augustein and Thomas (1991, 1992) describe a model of coaching in considerable detail. They are psychologists who set out to devise a model of human learning in 'real' situations based on studies of people's learning over many years across a range of work, domestic and leisure activities. The central element of their model is a series of conversations with a coach, who develops the person's ability to reflect and build on their experiences. They claim that such conversations lead to improvements in

job performance, learning skills, creative abilities and to greater involvement in work. They provide no evidence to support these claims.

Despite the increased role of coaching for professionals in the private sector, it has received little attention within educational psychology. One exception is McCarthy (1992) who, in her review of CPD for EPs, suggests that coaching can be a 'powerful and effective method of staff development' that can provide a motivating way of learning from day-to-day work. Despite stressing its importance, she does not discuss its application for EPs in any detail.

d. Self reflection:

There is some mention of self-reflection in the general literature on CPD. Harri-Augustein and Thomas (1992) suggest that their coaching model can be used as a form of internal dialogue, and Hawkins and Shohert (2000) mention 'self-supervision' as a way of reflecting on work. In relation to the work of EPs, Mellor (1998) provides a detailed and useful account of self-reflection for professional development. He suggests a possible format for EPs to use for self-reflection:

- Celebration.
- What was I trying to achieve?
- Influencing factors – internal and external.
- Could I have dealt with the situation differently?

He is very clear that this is a personal approach and acknowledges that the link between reflection and action is far from clear. However, he claims that, from his

own experience, such reflection can lead to changes in behaviour and suggests that it should become an accepted and central part of EPs' everyday jobs.

Integrating CPD activities

Relatively little has been written about planning and evaluating CPD activities over time and much of the literature in this area is rather anecdotal. Maister (1993) reflects on his own career development as a management consultant and suggests that all professionals need a 'personal strategic plan' that focuses on a highly specific set of knowledge and skills that need to be developed. The types of questions addressed in the plan are:

- In what ways are you more valuable in the market place than last year?
- What do you plan to do to make yourself more valuable?
- What specific new skills do you plan to enhance or acquire next year?
- What is your personal career plan for the next 3 years?
- What, precisely, do you want to be famous for?

The literature on CPD in educational psychology pays little attention to the process of planning CPD experiences over longer periods of time and in terms of career development.

CPD: Summary

In conclusion, CPD is considered an important element of professional practice, although it has received surprisingly little attention within the literature relating to educational psychology. In particular, very little has been written about CPD for

management skills for EPs. A range of CPD approaches has been discussed, with particular emphasis on workplace-based and semi-formal approaches.

3. INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

This section considers the author's personal experiences in the light of the literature outlined above.

3.1. The new Senior EP role

The new Senior EP role involved the management of professionals and may therefore have presented particular challenges in relation to managing people (Flynn, 1999). The fact that it also included 0.5 'patch' EP work represents the blurred boundary between professionals and managers and it fits closely with the forms of 'hybrid' role outlined by Causer and Exworthy, (1999). It is also closely allied to McKenna and Maister's (2002) descriptions of managing a team of professionals, in which the manager relates to a team of peers and colleagues rather than a team of 'workers'. It is difficult to relate the role specifically to the literature on EP management because that literature is so small. Fox's (1992) outline of some of the complexities of the Senior EP role appear to be relevant, particularly his observation that in large hierarchically organised services, Senior EPs can have a wide range of responsibilities.

The role certainly included an emphasis on the 'people' aspects of management (Cameron, 1995; Lawton & Rose, 1994) and the importance of interpersonal skills in

the workplace (Wylie & Grothe, 1993). The importance of building relationships and teams is stressed in much of the general management literature (Bennis, 1999; Jay, 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; McKenna & Maister, 2002) and this was a key element of the role – although this was never made explicit. Once again, it is difficult to look at the role specifically from the perspective of management in educational psychology because most of this literature focuses on organisational and task management (e.g. Bartram & Wolfendale, 1999; Kerfoot, 1995; Watmough & Thompson, 1995). However, Cameron's (1995) paper is an exception to this, and his thoughts on the importance of people management are a useful reference point for some of the interpersonal aspects of the role. His notions of empowerment, homology, cultural synergy and intrinsic motivation were all key aspects of the work. However, these were not made explicit in practice and they were arguably not given the attention they deserve. Cameron's paper provides a helpful framework within which to think more carefully and deeply about these areas and to guide future development of this Senior EP role.

3.2. Continuing professional development and the Senior EP role

General considerations

Overall, looking at the pattern of CPD activities undertaken for this role there was a focus on more formal activities rather than the more informal ones described in Bee and Bee's (2003) continuum of CPD activities. This may reflect Garrick's (1998) claim that organisations tend to promote CPD activities that are perceived to directly improve performance rather than more informal ones. There was no planned CPD programme for the post and this may reflect the lack of emphasis placed on CPD in

EP services (Frederickson, 1988; McCarthy, 1992). It may also be an indication that some of the barriers identified by Friedman *et al.* (2001) may have been operating.

In the writer's view the main barriers in relation to Friedman's framework were lack of time and a constraining CPD scheme (in that it focused only on formal training).

However, the learning for this new role did take place within an EP Service that could be described as a learning organisation in terms of Brachen's (2001) characteristics. For example, it was a supportive organisation where risks could be taken, where problem-solving approaches were used and where individual beliefs and practice were valued.

When the CPD experiences are considered specifically from the perspective of the development of management skills, they do not seem to reflect the emphasis on interpersonal skills in the general management literature (e.g. Beckett, 1999; Lawton & Rose, 1994; Maister, 1993). Rather, they seem to reflect the lack of emphasis on interpersonal management skills in EP services (Cameron, 1995) and the criticisms regarding the lack of training for EP managers (Hedderly, 1997).

The use of specific CPD techniques

a. Appraisal and feedback:

The fact that an appraisal system was used is in line with the findings that many EP services have such a system (Imich *et al.*, 1992; Twiselton, 1992; Webster, 2001).

The use of 360° feedback is found in only a few services (Webster, 2001) but it is used in some services (e.g. Sharpe *et al.*, 2000) and the literature reflects the importance of feedback from others (Marsick & Watkins, 1990).

It is difficult to know how effective this particular appraisal and feedback system was because it was so informal. It may well have not met many of McCarthy's (1992) features of an effective appraisal system because the Principal EP was very much in control of the process. In addition, there are some significant concerns about the particular model of 360° feedback. It did not meet several of the criteria outlined by Sharpe *et al.* (2000) in relation to an effective 360° feedback model for EPs. For example, it was not anonymised, raters were not selected on the basis of objective criteria, raters' evaluations were not aggregated and very little time and support was given for interpreting the feedback. The recommendation that 360° questionnaires for EPs are carefully designed and informed by the literature did not appear to be the case this may explain why the information gathered was of relatively little use in informing future CPD.

b. Informal learning activities:

This aspect of CPD is very popular in the general literature on professional development (Billett, 1999; Bould & Solomon, 2001; Garrick, 1998). However, despite the fact that, in the author's view, this was the main way in which learning took place, it was not recognised in any way, except possibly through the shadowing exercise. This lack of emphasis may link to Marsick and Watkin's (1990) call for this type of learning to be incorporated into CPD programmes and for Billett's (1999) suggestions for the development of a 'workplace curriculum' that includes a planned pattern of activities and support to workplace learning. The lack of emphasis on this type of learning in this instance also reflects the fact that it has been given very little emphasis in the EP literature (the one exception is Mellor, 1998).

c. Supervision and coaching:

Supervision has been recognised as an important part of professional development in the helping professions (Hawkins & Shohert, 2000) and also within EP services (Nolan, 1999; Pomerantz, 1993). It is therefore surprising that supervision was not available in this instance. However this may link to Nolan's (1999) finding that supervision was less common for Senior EPs than for other colleagues. Similarly, there was no attention to coaching in this case, although coaching is very prominent in the general literature on CPD (e.g. Bee & Bee, 2003; Harri-Augustein & Thomas, 1991, 1992). However, coaching is another area that has been given very little attention in the educational psychology literature, although McCarthy (1992) notes that it has considerable potential for EPs. The lack of emphasis on coaching in this particular case may therefore be indicative of a lack of consideration in the profession as a whole.

d. Self-reflection:

This was an important element of professional development in the author's experience but it was not formalised. The literature suggests that this process may be important for professional development (Harri-Augustein & Thomas 1992; Hawkins & Shohert, 2000) and it could therefore have been more beneficial if more emphasis had been given to it. Mellor (1998) outlines a model for self-reflection in EP practice and his model could easily be built into the author's everyday practice.

Integrating CPD experiences

In this example, short-term CPD targets were formulated on an annual basis through the appraisal meeting. This process was controlled by the Principal EP and tended to

focus on more formal learning activities and not on the interpersonal aspects of management. An overall plan for development across a longer period of time was also lacking. Maister's (1993) account of a 'personal strategic plan' for his work as a management consultant could well be a useful format for planning the author's CPD in the longer term, particularly in relation to management skills.

3.3. Implications for future development

This assignment has looked at a particular Senior EP role and at the CPD activities undertaken to develop the interpersonal management skills necessary for that role. Interpersonal management skills have been given a high profile in the general management literature but not within the small literature on management in EP services. Cameron's (1995) paper on the 'people factor' in EP management is an exception to this and appears to be a useful starting point for clarifying and developing some of the interpersonal management aspects of this particular Senior EP role. As such, it could prove a useful framework for guiding future CPD experiences for the author in relation to the interpersonal aspects of management. It could also provide a rationale for promoting the importance of 'people management' within the particular EP service.

In relation to the particular CPD activities undertaken, little or no attention has been paid to how EPs can develop their interpersonal management skills via CPD activities. In this particular case, there was a lack of attention paid to interpersonal aspects of management. No plan was developed to guide the way these management skills would be acquired, and there was an emphasis on more formal methods of

training. Analysis of the CPD activities undertaken in relation to the literature provided several indications as to how the author could further develop specific CPD approaches:

- Seek more joint involvement in the appraisal process, so that it is not controlled solely by the Principal EP.
- Suggest that the service considers developing its 360° feedback model, to incorporate some of the guidance in the literature.
- Pay greater attention to informal learning in the workplace by building it into CPD activities agreed through appraisal.
- Request coaching meetings with the Principal EP.
- Use peer support and supervision with the other Senior EPs to reflect on day-to-day experiences.
- Consider using Mellor's (1998) self-reflection framework for selected pieces of day-to-day management work.
- Develop a 'personal strategic plan' for professional development over the next few years.

These actions could potentially enhance the development of interpersonal management skills and provide a coherent structure for planning, monitoring and evaluating their development.

3.4. Wider professional implications

This assignment has focused on the personal experiences of the author but it may also serve to highlight issues that are relevant to the wider professional context. Several authors (e.g. Kerfoot, 1995; Rowland, 2002; Wright *et al.*, 1995) have outlined the changes that LEAs and EP services are undergoing in terms of the

‘modernisation agenda’. This includes moves towards areas such as performance management, a focus on outcomes, traded services and delegation of funding. Interpersonal aspects of management would seem to be key within this context and effective management is ‘*crucial to the profession thriving rather than merely surviving*’ in this new context (Rowland, 2002, p.290). In addition, the paper by Cameron (1995) suggests there is a need to balance this emphasis on performance management with a focus on the interpersonal aspects of management. The assignment has highlighted this lack of emphasis, but has also helped to strengthen the author’s commitment to developing the interpersonal management skills required in the modern LEA context.

Also of relevance is the shift in EP practice towards more proactive and preventative roles, as recommended by the DfEE working party report on educational psychology services (DfEE, 2000). In the same way that the modernisation agenda represents a challenge to services, this new EP role presents opportunities that will require effective service management if they are to be embraced. The arguments for effective people management would appear to be equally applicable to this aspect of the changing LEA context.

Finally, the author’s personal experiences of CPD activities in relation to management skills have also highlighted the need for more focused training and development activities for EPs in these areas. Current moves within the profession to extend initial training and to record CPD activities through the British Psychological Society may prove helpful in this respect. For example, EPs may be encouraged to develop CPD plans over time and to recognise a wider range of

activities as legitimate CPD. The extended initial training could also allow more time to be spent on the interpersonal aspects of both EP practice and EP management. These aspects are arguably relevant to all EPs who will work within a service, not just those with management responsibilities. Such an emphasis would also serve to give these areas prominence from the start of EPs' careers, rather than waiting until they need to develop such skills to fulfil the requirements of a particular role.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This assignment has considered the development of interpersonal management skills through consideration of one particular case example, drawn from the author's own experience. It has highlighted a number of ways in which the development of these skills could be promoted for the author in the future.

Although the assignment has considered a single example of the process of developing these skills, the experiences of the author do link closely with the literature. There is a general lack of emphasis in the educational psychology literature on management skills and to a lesser extent on CPD - and virtually no consideration of the development of interpersonal management skills or the role of informal learning. This is in sharp contrast with the general literature on professional development and management skills, where interpersonal aspects of management are given a very high profile in terms of efficiency in the market place and where

informal learning is seen as an important process. Overall, there is a need for educational psychology to refocus on the interpersonal and psychological aspects of management, and to give more consideration to how such skills can best be developed. Current changes within LEAs and within the profession may serve to prompt such changes and give a higher profile to the development of management skills.

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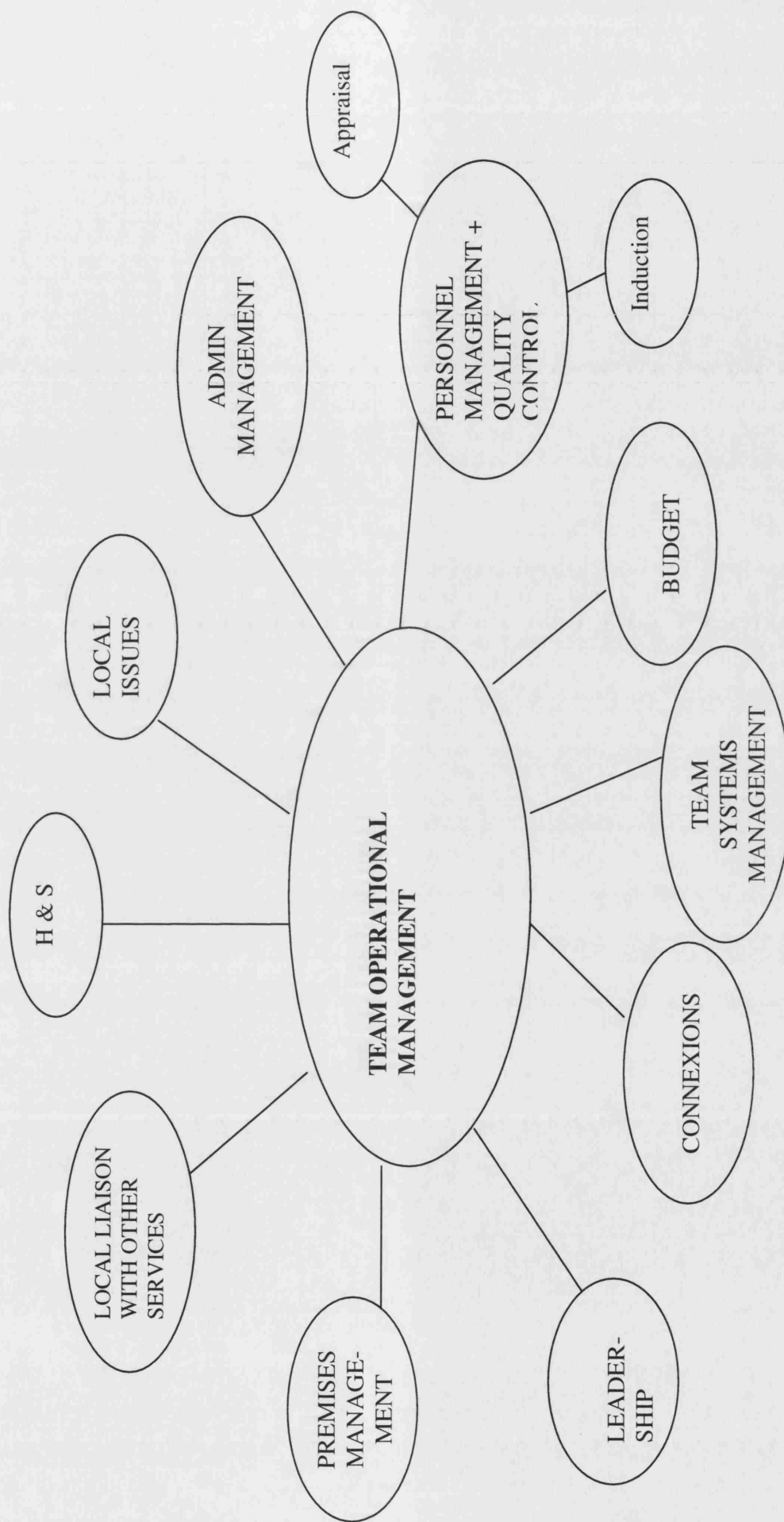
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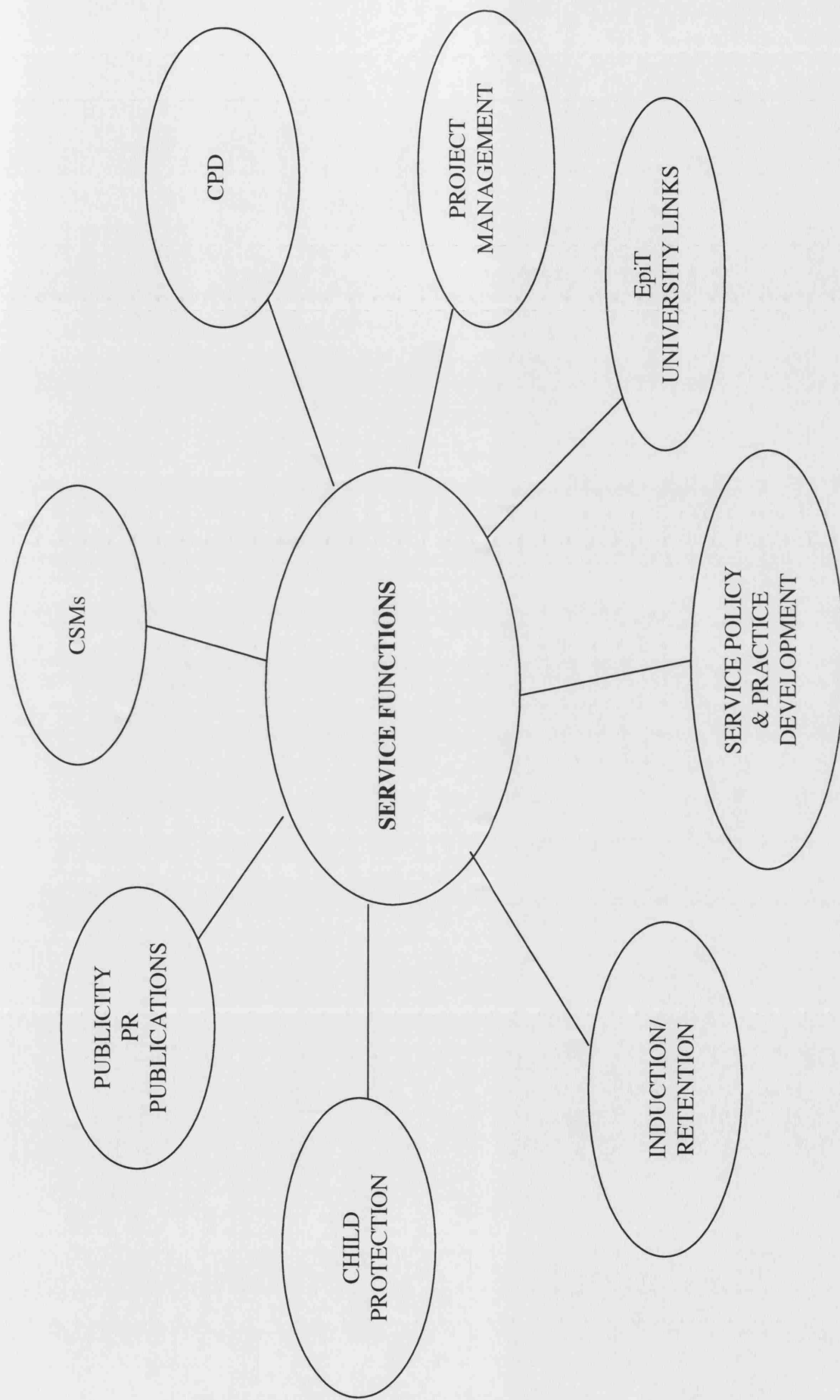
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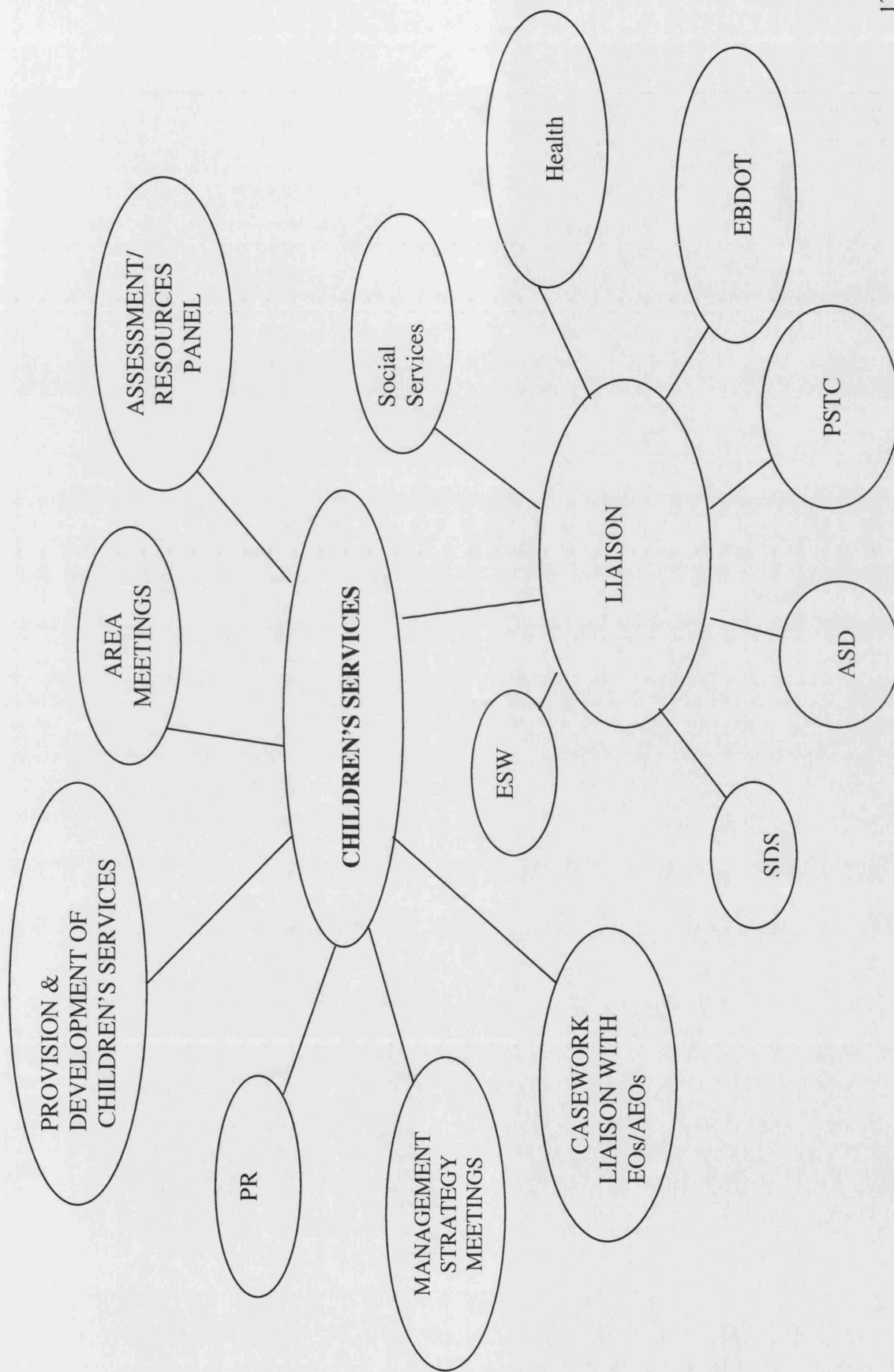
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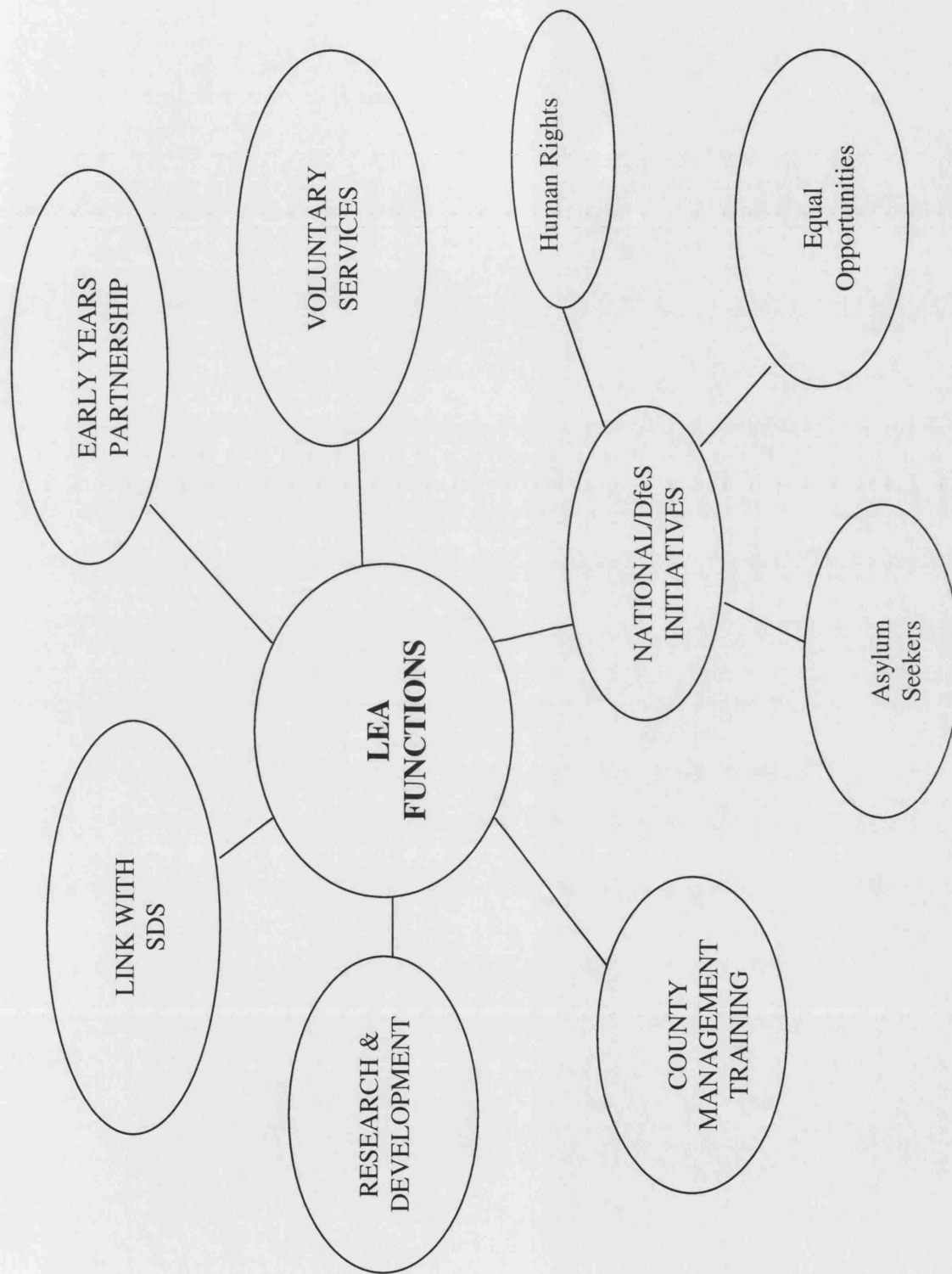
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APPENDIX 1 Outline of the Senior EP role









APPENDIX 2

360° questionnaire

Dear Colleague

Staff Appraisal re :

As part of our developing staff appraisal scheme, X has agreed for me to contact you, to seek your views on those aspects of his/her work performance that are familiar to you. The whole purpose of this scheme, is to ensure that staff are challenged and supported to deliver quality services.

It would be of great assistance if you could take a few minutes to rate each of the following items on a scale of 1 (Cause for concern) to 7 (Excellent). Please would you also comment, where appropriate, if you have any suggestions about what would need to happen for your rating on any given item to improve.

CLARITY OF ROLE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
+	+	+	+	+	+	+

Clear about the ways s/he can work with you and support your work

Comments

PLANNING

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
+	+	+	+	+	+	+

Agrees plans of action which are appropriate, implemented and followed through.

Comments

EMPATHY.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
+	+	+	+	+	+	+

Understands your needs and communicates sensitively

Comments

RELATIONSHIPS

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
+	+	+	+	+	+	+

Maintains effective and productive relationships

Comments

RELIABILITY

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
+	+	+	+	+	+	+

Realistic and reliable in setting time scales for action

Comments

FLEXIBILITY

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
+	+	+	+	+	+	+

Flexible and adaptable when unforeseen circumstances arise, within reasonable constraints

Comments

Thankyou for taking the time with this return.